

Foreign exchange students from Germany, Ukraine come to OHS

By Ellie Jones

features editor

Oxford High School has welcomed two foreign exchange students, Justus Schmidt and Mariia (or Masha) Hontarenko, for the 2023-2024 school year.

Schmidt, a junior in high school, is one of the exchange students this year. He came to Oxford from Germany.

"I'm from Oldenburg, and that's in Olversaxony," Schmidt said.

Schmidt decided to be an exchange student because he wanted to experience another country or culture and improve his english.

"I could choose to go to the U.S., Canada, or Australia, and that I came to Mississippi was quite random," Schmidt said. "I could be anywhere in the states."

Schmidt likes Oxford High School so far. He enjoys the new environment, people, and the way the school works.

"It seems like you're a big group, like a family that supports each other," Schmidt said.

The Joyce family is hosting Schmidt for his exchange year. They have been very supportive of him through this transition.

"The biggest help has been my family," Schmidt said. "They showed me how their culture works to this point."

The school Schmidt attended in Germany was very different from Oxford High School. Schmidt feels there are more choices offered here than his original school.

"You can choose whatever subjects you want," Schmidt said. "I have a schedule in Germany where I have to do specific stuff."

The facilities here have also been very impressive to Schmidt. He was shown around the school his first day here.

"When I saw the gym I was really amazed and also the theater and all the equipment," Schmidt said.

"Our gym in Germany is about half of the second gym here."

One of the biggest differences Schmidt has noticed between his

and

is

ay
ts
a
r-
y

here. "We just have clubs, we don't have school sports in Germany, and I played club soccer and club volleyball there," Schmidt said.

Schmidt has found the sports programs very useful. He's gotten involved with two of the teams here.

"I play on the soccer team and club soccer in Tupelo," Schmidt said. "I joined the tennis team as well, so I will play tennis in the spring."

The environment in Oxford has also been a big change for Schmidt. The people and climate here are very different from Germany.

"It's way hotter and rainy here, and what you eat and what I'm used to is really different," Schmidt said.

The hardest part of this experience for Schmidt has been missing his friends and family that are in Germany.

"The most difficult thing was to see my friends in Germany do things without me, and I see my family going on vacation without me," Schmidt said. "I think about if I should have stayed home because if I would have stayed home I would've been with them."

Schmidt has found the community here, especially his host brother, Colby Joyce, to be very helpful for him in adapting to these changes.

"My host brother helped me a lot with how school works and how teenagers here are," Schmidt said.

Schmidt is looking forward to the rest of this year. He's excited for all the new experiences he'll have.

"I'm really looking forward to taking part in Thanksgiving and Christmas, and my family is planning to take two vacations with me," Schmidt said. "I'm really looking forward to seeing this country, the national parks, and the cities."

Schmidt thinks being an exchange student requires open-mindedness. He recommends becoming an exchange student to anyone who is interested.

"I think you learn a lot through the exchange year," Schmidt said. "You learn about yourself and how you react when you have to change something."

Hontarenko is another exchange student at Oxford. She is a junior this year and is originally from Ukraine.

"In Ukraine we have regions, we don't have states," Hontarenko said.

"I'm from Zaporizhzhia region. My hometown is called Berdiansk."

Becoming an exchange student has been one of Hontarenko's goals, and this year she finally met it.

"I didn't become an exchange student on my first try," Hontarenko said.

Hontarenko participated in the F.L.E.X. exchange program for international students sponsored by the U.S. Department of State.

"It's a free program that selects students from all over the world to become an exchange student in the United States for one academic year," Hontarenko said.

Hontarenko joined Oxford High school on Aug. 25. She has really enjoyed it here so far and loves the school and community.

"I love the attitude teachers have towards students, basically the overall attitude, and that students are respectful to each other," Hontarenko said. "Oxford High School is a place I want to go to everyday."

Hontarenko believes Oxford is similar to Berdiansk in many ways. One of the biggest differences Hontarenko has found is the community in Oxford.

"I'm surprised by how local people are respectful to each other," Hontarenko said. "Usually they're trying to stay positive in public, so it's basically the attitude that you give on a daily basis."

In Berdiansk, education and University is very important. They don't put much focus on extracurriculars. Hontarenko appreciates the clubs and programs offered in Oxford that she could not get in Ukraine.

"The thing that I think I like the most about Oxford besides people is that you have a lot of opportunities and something to start with," Hontarenko said.

Since coming to Oxford High School, Hontarenko has tried to get involved with the school in some way. She decided to join Crown Club for the year.

"I'm looking forward to having those opportunities I couldn't get in Ukraine," Hontarenko said.

Hontarenko believes people in the United States are lucky to get the opportunities that other places do not and should not turn them down.

"If you have an opportunity, don't be afraid to try," Hontarenko said. "It's not a big deal if you lose

or don't accomplish what you wanted to." Hontarenko has a s

not struggled much with adapt- ing to Oxford. She feels that she is a very open-minded person, so the change has not been hard.

"Being an exchange student usually means you need to be flexible," Hontarenko said. "I can't say that anything really bothered me."

She feels that the people here, like her host family the Laportes, have been very helpful in getting to know Oxford.

"I'm an open-minded person, so meeting new people is not challenging for me," Hontarenko said. "I'm also grateful for my school teachers trying to be positive and keep me interested."

Hontarenko is elated about the rest of her exchange year. She's particularly excited to learn more about the history of Oxford and the United States.

"I'm looking forward to meeting even more people, diving into the history of Oxford, learning about how the city works, and traveling to some new places," Hontarenko said.

Hontarenko is extremely grateful for the opportunity. She believes that it is rare to get to have such an immersive experience like this at her age. She advises others to take an opportunity like this if given the chance.

"It's a unique experience which will certainly help you later in life," Hontarenko said. "It's an opportunity which gives you a chance to learn a country's culture, beliefs, and traditions, make strong and long-lasting relationships with people, and basically discover the country from the inside."

Courtesy of Masha Hontarenko
Masha Hontarenko arrived at the airport from Ukraine and was welcomed by her family.

