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Page B-1

Ties Across the Ocean

Thanks to En Famille, a unique exchange program for 8- to 11-year-olds ...

When Claire Mengin moved to Orcutt in late August, the 11-year-old French girl's grasp of the English language was limited to names of colors and the numbers one through 20.

By the end of the first semester living with the Marks family, she had earned As and Bs in all of her sixth-grade courses at St. Louis de Montfort Elementary School and received special recognition for her study habits and conduct.

This month, one of the youngest exchange students in the United States will head home to the tiny village of Nesles La Montagne. She will take with her the 12-year-old American girl with whom she has shared classes, a home and a family for the past six months, Callie Marks.

Callie's parents, Chris and Kristi Marks, were among the first half-dozen families in the nation to get involved in En Famille, a foreign exchange program tailored for children ages 9 to 13. Most foreign exchange programs are designed for students in high school or college.

« At this stage, you have to be able to take them in as part of the family, give them the same hugs, the same love you would give your own children, » Chris said. « With the older exchanges, the teen hormones have kicked in and they are not as willing to make the sounds you have to make to learn another language and they're not willing to make the motions they have to make to be part of a family unit. »

For the past 20 years, Jacques and Katherine Pinault of St. André de Cubzac, France, have organized similar exchanges between children in France, his native land, and England, her native country, as well as Germany and Ireland. The children stay with families who are advised not to speak the children's native language. The children are only to read and speak the language of their host country.

When they decided to expand the program to America, they contacted the Marks family and others who had taken advantage of international home exchanges.

« We thought, gosh, we'd like our kids to become multicultural and multilingual, but we're a pretty typical American family, so didn't have a vehicle to do that, » Chris said.

There are five Marks children, but only one, Callie, was in the appropriate age group.

She was thrilled with the idea, not only of hosting a French sister, but also of traveling abroad.

« I think it will be fun to learn a language and have a friend over there, » Callie said.

While the exchange of teenagers has become fairly commonplace, the Pinaults advise host families that they might not have 100 percent support from friends and neighbors who find out they are about to send their small children abroad for half a year.

« I would be more worried about sending them at 16 because I know, at 12, no one's going to say, 'Here is a map, find an airport and get out of here, » Kristi said. « I'd be more worried when they are old enough to have taken an interest in boys and going out. »

She also may have been more worried about sending her child to live with a family of strangers if Claire had turned out to be a rotten child.

« We've had Claire for six months and she's a great kid, » Kristi said. « She's sweet, well-mannered, a great student and she never talks back. So, I know her parents have the same values we have. »

The road to French fluency will be bumpy for Callie, just as Claire's trek into English had its challenges.

The first two months were very difficult, Claire said, because she did not understand what people were saying. She took English and reading classes at the second-grade level initially, then worked her way up to her own grade level.

Her host siblings have helped her along, with a little teasing and fun here and there.

Her 15-year-old host brother, Connor, has been her strictest youth teacher, harassing her about dropping her Hs or speaking with such a French accent her English is not clear. But he has also had his share of fun with her,

making up words for things rather than telling her the true English words.

Callie's face erupts into an uncontrollable grin as she tells stories of Claire's habit of using Connor's words like "larfco" for "book" and "coonspacula" for "magnifying glass."

Claire an only child, said she and her parents also missed each other, though they communicate regularly via e-mail and telephone.

But the Marks family gave her brothers and sisters she never had at home.

« I love this life and I love French life, » said Claire. « You can learn from your parents or your school, but it's more cool and more fun to learn from other kids. »

Kristi said the girls are already planning their futures.

« It is so cute, » she said. « They're talking about being in each other's weddings and visiting each other and sending their children to live with each other someday. »

The Marks family will travel to France Feb.23 to return Claire home and meet her family.



Right, French exchange student Claire Mengin, 11, stands with her host sister and parents : Callie Marks, 12, Chris and Kristi. The Marks family will send Callie home with Claire to France later this month to begin her six-month exchange.

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