

## Inside the Santa Inez Valley

Winter 2000/2001

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### In life

### Trading lives

By Brooke Comer

The Jessups of the Santa Ynez Valley and the Laurs of Perigeux, France, exchange children for a year.



Despite being from different countries, Molly Jessup (top) and Marie Laur have lots in common including Harry Potter books, M&M's candy, and sports.

Santa Ynez Valley children may be oblivious to the local charm and color of their hometown, but for eleven-year-old Marie-Edwige Laur, a native of Perigeux, a mid-sized city near Bordeaux in France, Valley life is a new adventure, full of soccer games, coyotes ("we don't have coyotes where I live," she explains, "and I love to watch them") and the small classes and innovative curriculum of the Dunn Middle School. "It's all very different from my life at home," says Laur, who admits that it took some adjusting to settle into her new home with the Jessup family in Santa Ynez, "but I love it here."

Laur's seven month stay in the valley, which began in August, originated when Hayley Firestone Jessup contacted En Famille, a French-based organization matches up families in Europe and America based on the ages and interests of their children. Friends of the Jessups spoke glowingly of their experience with an En Famille exchange, which convinced Doug and Hayley Jessup to give Samantha, 13, and Molly, 11, both students at Dunn Middle School, exposure to foreign culture.

"As wonderful as it is to grow up in the Valley," says Hayley Jessup, who

spent a year abroad in France after her own graduation from Dunn, "I think it's important to have experiences outside the valley too." When Marie joined the Jessup family last August, the Jessup's older daughter Samantha flew to France to live with the Laur family. When she returns in February with 13-year-old daughter Geraldine Laur for a seven month in the valley, Molly and Marie will go to France.



In France, Marie (left) has two rabbits to feed. "Here, there are eight alpacas, two Labradors, three cats and six chickens." But here she also has Molly (right) to help.

The idea of sending her children out of the country for such a long period of time was daunting, Jessup admits. "I do miss my daughter, but I know she's having a wonderful time. I can hear it in her voice when I talk to her on the phone. And that's the whole purpose of the program; to enable children to assimilate into new families and new cultures."

Jessup was also confident that the match - made by the director of En Famille and based on the 20 page applications both families must complete - was a perfect one. The Jessup's three daughters are the same ages (Fiona Jessup and Astride Laur are both six years old, and the Jessup's have a one year old son, Ben). "We were lucky," says Jessup. "When I met Helene Laur it was as if I'd found a soul sister. She was here for four days when she came to deliver Marie, and we spent most of that time talking about our similar backgrounds and approaches to child raising. "It was a phenomenal experience to discover how much we had in common. Doug and I were celebrating our 15th anniversary the day they arrived; when Helene found out, her face went white; it was her 15th anniversary as well."

Marie and Molly share common bonds as well, that have made Marie's transition to valley life easier. They both love Harry Potter books, M&M's candy, card games like Spit and War, sports (Molly is a soccer star while Marie favors tennis). There are issues on which they differ, but these are generally minor; Marie loves goat cheese, Molly does not.

The red food coloring that Molly puts in her oatmeal makes Marie shudder. But both love animals. Animal care might be considered a chore by most Valley children, but Marie Laur loves to feed the Jessup menagerie. "At home, I only have two rabbits," she notes. "Here, there are eight alpacas, two Labradors, three cats and six chickens."



Molly (right) shoots a practice ball to Marie before a Saturday game. At home in France, Marie (left) plays tennis, but Molly's enthusiasm for soccer caused Marie to join a local Valley soccer team.

Dunn Middle School is a change for Marie Laur, who is used to classes of 30 in a school of 2,000 students. She loves the class trips, which included a recent visit to Washington D.C., "where we got to see all the monuments and museums and ride the metro." She is also enjoying a class project in which students work at local businesses; she and Molly will work at a vet clinic with Dr. Carl Zaboly. "I like the schoolwork here," she notes. "The English is a little hard sometimes, but it's getting better."

Molly Jessup is not yet studying French, but Marie is confident that she can teach her friend "on the plane, on the way to France." Molly points out that her sister Samantha, who did not take French lessons prior to going to Perigeux, can now understand the language and is beginning to speak it. How does Molly feel about leaving the valley, where she's lived all her life, for a seven-month stretch in France?

"I'm excited and I'm scared," she admits. "It will be hard to be away from my family, and I think the schoolwork will be a little harder, but I know I'll meet a lot of people. I love to make new friends, so I'm really looking forward to that."

For more information about foreign exchange programs for children, contact En Famille at [www.enfamille.com](http://www.enfamille.com)

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