



SCHOOL YEAR ABROAD

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SYA France 50th Anniversary Celebration
Reception at the Ambassador's Residence, Paris
July 28, 2017

Good evening, *bonsoir et bienvenue*. Thank you so much to Tom Hassan, and to everyone for joining us this evening.



Lisa Petzold FR'99, right, with her French sister at the Ambassador's Residence

What a wonderful weekend in Rennes, celebrating the 50th anniversary of School Year Abroad. And I am so pleased that SYA is finishing the celebration at the official residence this evening. As Tom mentioned, I am a Foreign Service Officer with the Department of State currently serving at the U.S. Embassy in Paris as a political officer. And I am also a School Year Abroad France '99 alum.

I can clearly remember the day my acceptance letter from SYA arrived- my mom cried. I didn't understand at the time, because in my mind I was still free to make the choice if I wanted to attend the program or not. When I saw how upset my mom was, I told her, "don't worry

mom, I don't have to go." She looked at me and said, "oh, you're going. What an amazing opportunity this is. You are going." Both of my parents instilled in my brother and me the importance of education, and taking advantage of every opportunity in front of us. So when I arrived in Rennes 18 years ago, after my first transatlantic flight, sitting next to my classmates who were strangers, after taking the bus from Paris to Rennes, after sitting in the school all day in orientation, waiting until the designated hour when the hosts families would come to pick us up, I tried to remind myself what my mom said, "what an amazing opportunity this is." She must have used the same line on my brother a few years later. He too is an SYA alum, Spain 2002.

When that designated hour came on that first day in Rennes 18 years ago, all of the students were standing behind the gates of 5, allée Sainte Marie, like puppies waiting to be chosen, and host families came in one by one to pick up their designated puppy. My French mom took me home, gave me a tour of the house, left me to take a shower and get settled in my new room. For the first few weeks in Rennes, it felt like my French mom was the only French person I could understand, even a little bit. She pronounced each word, she pointed at things to give me visuals. That first day, she showed me how to work the shower, pointed to the red faucet and said "chaud" and the blue and said "froid." And I was very grateful. Then, and really whenever I spoke with her, I felt like I could actually speak and understand French. I was so very lucky to be able to celebrate in Rennes this past weekend with my host parents. And I am happy that my host sister, Benedicte, is here this evening. It has been complicated, over the years, to describe our relationship. I refer to Benedicte as my French sister. Which often leads to the questions, "wait, are you French?" Or "Wait, you have a sister?" At this point, I also have a French brother-in-law, two French nieces, and a French nephew. I was a témoin (witness) in Benedicte's wedding, have spent countless vacations in her guest room, and now spend evenings, weekends, lunches at her house in Paris. She has a lot to

thank SYA for, as well. She met her husband at an SYA event, because both of their families were hosting SYA kids. My host family made my year in Rennes.

What struck me about the celebration in Rennes this weekend, is how over and over alumni spoke of SYA as a life-changing experience. I have worked for the Department of State for over seven years now. But I am sure the decision that I wanted to spend my life and career living and working overseas, representing my country, being involved in cross cultural dialogue, was made when I arrived in Rennes. That year when I was 16, speaking another language, integrating into a family in a different country and culture, taught me to love adventure and dialogue and languages. There is no question in my mind that living in France when I was 16 shaped how I look at the world, how I approach language, what I think of travel. My basis in French language learning from my year in Rennes helped me when I had to learn Spanish before my assignment at the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, or Arabic before my assignment in Lebanon. In my last job before arriving here in Paris, I served as the Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. In that role, I oversaw a multitude of exchange programs, including one that sends high school students to the United States for an academic year to live with host families and attend classes at American high schools. The application and interview process for that program was intense. And I can tell you that I agonized over every decision. Because I knew that acceptance into that program would be life changing. Like SYA had been for me.