

June Nelson Memorial Scholarship Essay

La Bise. Out of all of the cultural differences I experienced during my semester student exchange to France, this one sticks out the most. *La Bise* is how people greet each other in France, but there are so many different ways to do *la bise* that what should be a simple greeting turns into sudden internal panic. I always wondered which side of the face I should start on, how many kisses I should give, or if I should even give this person *la bise* or if I should just shake their hand. For example, greeting my host family was with two kisses starting from the left, greeting my host grandma was with four kisses starting from the left, and greeting family friends in another region of France was two kisses starting from the right, *c'est fou!* This confusing greeting which doesn't have any rules or guidelines to help struggling newbies like myself and which caused me many embarrassing almost lip touches is one thing that not only gave me many interesting stories, but also helped me relate to other exchange students. While we all came from countries around the world with different cultural backgrounds, we bonded by talking about *la bise* in French, a language none of us spoke perfectly and a language which we all spoke with using strong accents. It was in that moment that I realized that if we could become friends in five minutes by communicating in a strange language about a strange custom in a strange country, there had to be a way to extend this instant relation into the complexity of diverse nations.

It was also in France where I realized a trivial gesture like *la bise* is really nothing to be worried about. While abroad I was placed in a weekly class with other students from my city who were also learning French. I was the only one who was there by choice and not because I had to be. There were two other girls my age who were there and two younger elementary level boys. One girl I remember was from Algeria and her first language was Kabyle, a local language of Algeria. From school and constantly moving around she had learnt Arabic, English, Spanish, and French and was only nineteen. She moved to France with her parents, who she said didn't speak any french, and she had to repeat some of her high school education in order to get a degree from a french school. Even though she wasn't an exchange student and didn't come to France by choice, whenever we met up to walk to our classes we did *la bise*. It's strange how such a foreign concept can become so habitual. Taking those French classes I learned much more

than just French, but I learnt how lucky I was to be able to pay to study in another country for enjoyment instead of being forced to move there for my own wellbeing.

It's no longer enough for me to be a part of International Club, to volunteer with AFS (the program I went on exchange with) to promote the organization, to ask for stronger language programs at local school board forums, or to spend my free time learning Italian and German on language learning apps. I feel an urging need to find a way to bring my passion and forward thinking to a broader audience. In the future I want to use my skills in the media arts to spread an international understanding of cultures and languages as a way to promote peace among people and nations. At college I want to refine my skills in cinematography, web design, and photography while still taking language courses. I want to use my creativity perhaps by creating a youtube channel targeted towards young people where I would focus on teaching the slang of languages that is actually spoken instead of the stiff textbook courses learned in schools. I could also create a website with fun quizzes about what language to learn that would best suit individual learning styles. After seeing how quickly *la bise* greeted me with new friends from all around the world, I hope to use the once awkward greeting as an inspiration for my future years to accept the unknown, no matter how different it may be, and allow it to make me into a more diverse person.