

Ella Bernard is about to learn a lot about Thailand

By Bill Rea

Thailand is a country that not many people in this part of the world would know a lot about.

A Cedar Mills teen is hoping that will change for her a lot in the coming months.

Ella Bernard, 15, is on her way to Thailand, as part of the Rotary Student Exchange with the Palgrave club.

She was scheduled to leave yesterday (Wednesday) and will be away for 10 to 12 months (her return date has not yet been specified).

Ella said she didn't pick Thailand. "The people at Rotary chose for us," she said. She added she had been at a three-day camp in February with Rotarians and other students taking part in the exchange, where they got to know the young people and their personalities.

Ella will have to learn a new language, namely Thai, and that's not going to be easy. She said that Thailand is about the only place in the world where it's spoken, so it's been hard for her to find sources for learning it.

"I've been able to learn a couple of simple phrases," she said, adding she's had no way of determining how good her pronunciation has been.

Ella has learned the language has 48 consonants in a different script. She added she's been told that for the first couple of months, no one will really mind about her pronunciations.

She's also done some research on the country, and even recently made a presentation to Rotarians. She's learned about holidays like Songkran, which is a new year's celebration held in April. "It's pretty much like a four-day water fight," she said, adding people get splashed with water to wash away the sins that have accumulated over the year.

She's also learned the significance of Wai. She said it's a greeting, involving holding the palms of the hands together and touching part of one's face with the thumbs. "It's pretty much a sign of respect," she said, with touching the forehead with the thumbs being the highest sign, followed by touching the nose and the chin.

Ella's also going to have to get used to a different style of dress.

"They're very modest over there," she said, commenting that skirts go down to the knees and shoulders are covered. That might take some getting used to, as the average temperature there is about 30.

Ella said she will be staying in a town called Phanat Nikbion, which is in the province of Chonburi. She said it's roughly the same population as Bolton, and it's a commuter town, about an hour away from the capital of Bangkok.

She will be staying with host families while she's away, and Ella said she's been busy buying gifts for them. She's also been collecting pins to distribute. They have been coming from other Rotary clubs in this area, and people like Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson and Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson and MPP Sylvia Jones have been contributing too.

The first host family she'll be staying with has a mother who's a Rotarian. There are two sons, aged 26 and 24, and a 20-year-old daughter named Garfield, who's training to be a veterinarian. There's also a 16-year-old daughter, but Ella won't have too much time with her, since she'll soon be going on a Rotary exchange trip of her own to Ohio. But the two have been in contact through Facebook, and she's already been introduced to some of her classmates. While she will be attending school, Ella said she's not sure what courses she'll be taking.

She's also been told about the school uniform, complete with a blue pleated skirt (coming below the knees), a white sailor top, socks that go up almost to the knees, and a tie. And it will have her new name on it; Tor-Fah.

She said Garfield had explained that the name Ella means "beautiful fairy." From that, Garfield came up with the translation to Tor-Fah.

While she will be attending school, Ella said it's likely she will miss a year academically (she's going into Grade 11 at Mayfield Secondary School).

Ella said her grandfather Pat Clifford has been a Palgrave Rotarian for about 35 years. She attended some Rotary events and decided about a year ago to apply for the program. Her mother Tracy Clifford said the selection process takes about a year, and involves a lot of interviews, etc.

"The (Rotarian) district has been absolutely amazing in preparing these kids," she added.

Ella also said there will be Rotarians available to offer support while in Thailand.

She knows this is going to be quite an experience. On the one hand, she's confident that she'll be able to handle it. But there's also some nervousness there, knowing she's going to be living with people who don't speak much English. She added she's trying hard not to prejudge the experience or establish any mindsets.

?I'm just going to go in,? she said.

Rotary will be advancing Ella an allowance, so she will be able to learn something about money management. She is also hoping to pick up other skills, as well as being able to experience a new culture. Her mother said Rotary figures young people come back from experiences like this with about five extra years of maturity.



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