



YOUTH FOR UNDERSTANDING
Intercultural Exchange Programs

YFU FOUNDERS DAY - APRIL 8

April 8th marks an important day for Youth For Understanding (YFU) around the world. It marks the birthday of the towering figure whom we rightfully consider the founder of YFU: Rachel Andresen.

Rachel Josephine Andresen

Born: April 8, 1907, in Deerfield MI

Died: November 3, 1988, in South Lyon MI.

In 1951, motivated by a desire to help heal the wounds of World War II, Rachel Andresen brought German teenagers to live with American families for a one-year cultural and educational immersion. Out of this early initial effort, she founded Youth For Understanding (YFU) a non-profit, international, educational, high school student exchange program.

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I wondered how it would ever be possible to rebuild what had been destroyed. Even more important, what has been damaged within the people's lives and hearts. What could I ever do?”

- Dr. Rachel Andresen

More than 240,000 students have been on an exchange in the more than 5 decades since 1951. Rachel Andresen's pioneering work in youth exchange during the fifties made this experience possible for young Germans and provided the impetus for this later expansion. By 1960, programs were available for European, Asian, and Latin American students. Today, YFU has expanded to include partners in over 60 countries who provide opportunities for teenagers to live and learn about other cultures during a formative period in their lives. Rachel Andresen's work in the field of international youth exchange earned her a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 1973. She was also cited as one of the “founding five” of international citizen exchanges. In his 1985 book, *Bring Home the World*, author Stephen Rhinesmith (past president of American Field Service), dedicated his book, “To Rachel Andresen, Dwight Eisenhower, William Fulbright, Stephen Galatti and Donald Watt whose collective vision of the possibilities of international exchanges have enabled hundreds of thousands of us to bring home the world.”

Rachel Andresen was an extraordinarily charismatic leader of volunteers, first in Michigan, where she was born and raised, then throughout the United States, and soon around the world. Her vision, to build international understanding and world peace, was accomplished with the creation of Youth For Understanding (YFU), an organization providing international exchange opportunities at the high school level.

Amsterdam, 1948, was the impetus behind Rachel's life work toward international understanding. Honeymooning with her husband in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, Rachel was overwhelmed by the devastation caused by the war, and particularly struck by the lack of hope among the youth. The couple went on to Amsterdam, where the first post-war World Conference of the World Council of Churches took place. Rachel was close to the ecumenical movement for which the World Council of Churches (CoC) was the umbrella organization; she had begun to develop a local CoC in Ann Arbor, MI at



about that time. Rachel attended the conference sessions in Amsterdam, playing a part in a grand ceremony in which, the city lights of Amsterdam were turned on for the first time after World War II. Rachel said that the sudden illumination of the entire city was so impressive she vowed to do everything she could with her life “so that the lights would never go out again.”

Meeting her self imposed challenge happened three years later in 1951. As part of an effort to spread democratic values, the U.S. Government offered a year of academic study in the United States to high school students from Germany and Austria. The selected students were to live with volunteer host families and attend public high schools. Private organizations partnered with the Federal Government to find host families and support students and families throughout the experience. Seventy five German students were accepted by the Rotary Club in southeastern Michigan, where Rachel, who had a master’s degree in Social Work and led interdenominational church youth activities, volunteered to find host families and counsel students and families on adjustment issues. The Rotarians, however, soon dropped the program because of coordination problems. Rachel saw each of these students as a “new light” of hope in war-torn Europe, and was determined to see the program through. She persuaded the Michigan Council of Churches to partner with the U.S. Government, and dedicated her free time to running the program.

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Youth For Understanding is a dream come true.... To be part of it brings out the best in all of us. Each of us who has shared the magic of its being has contributed [to] something bigger than we are. We have learned to love and be loved, to trust and be trusted, to open our homes and our hearts to all people, everywhere.”

- Dr. Rachel Andresen

Rachel’s charisma and power of persuasion served her well as she successfully recruited an everincreasing numbers of volunteer host families through her personal networks and church contacts. Within a couple of years, the hosting program covered the State of Michigan, and by the late fifties, it had expanded into Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. The number of American families willing to welcome foreign students into their homes was growing. Some of Rachel’s original families from 1951, in fact, continued hosting for up to 25 years!

As the program spread geographically, student numbers quickly passed the 200, 300 and 500 marks. This was great progress toward Rachel’s vision of world peace, but it also was more than one dedicated volunteer could do in her spare time. And thus, a volunteer network was needed to help support students and host families. Rachel found this support most commonly in former host parents who were eager to deepen their involvement in the great cause. The YFU program continued to spread throughout the United States, first via people from Michigan who moved elsewhere and created new YFU volunteer networks in their new locations. Rachel’s vision turned out to be persuasive everywhere: Youth is our future; students of 16 or 17 years are young enough to become totally immersed in another culture and way of life, but old enough to understand what the experience of total immersion means, to draw conclusions from it and turn them into life choices - for peace, for understanding, for cooperation and for building bridges between cultures. Rachel saw this as a natural outflow of homestay experiences - such choices required no indoctrination; in fact, these students would be quite immune to indoctrination and ideology, for they had experienced difference and lived it.

Volunteerism, as Rachel promoted had a third dimension: in addition to the families who hosted students in the U.S., and those who volunteered to support the students in the U.S. and recruit Americans to go abroad, the concept of volunteering spread internationally. The occupation of Germany and Austria ended in 1955; after that, volunteers were needed in those and other countries to which YFU was spreading: across Europe, in Japan, in Latin America and in Africa. As people abroad got to know Rachel and YFU, they increasingly accepted her challenge that if you believe in something, you should take action. But volunteerism was quite alien to most of those countries. Former exchange students returning home from the U.S., were often aghast at the lack of commitment to mission-driven volunteerism at home and set about to change that. But Rachel’s challenge was always one to volunteer voluntarily: “You must know why you want to exchange with us,” she would always say, “Not just because we would like you to.”

In 1964, YFU was incorporated in Michigan as a separate not-for-profit corporation, and Rachel took full-time employment as the executive director of YFU. In the U.S., and internationally, YFU continued to be operated by mission-driven volunteers. When Rachel retired in 1973, YFU was the largest not-for-profit youth exchange program worldwide. She had been honored, cited and decorated by the U.S. Congress, State Legislatures and many foreign governments, including Germany, Finland, Chile, and Brazil. Rachel was also awarded three honorary doctorate degrees in Humanities from

Saginaw Valley College (1969), Eastern Michigan University (1972) and Central Michigan University (1973). She continued to inspire YFU volunteers as the Honorary President until shortly before she died. Rachel's charisma and her vision live on.

YFU currently exchanges about 4,500 students annually and has exchanged more than 240,000 students worldwide since 1951. YFU's mission is preparing young people for their responsibilities and opportunities in a changing, interdependent world. Today, YFU relies on 12,000 active volunteers; about 12% of whom (about 1,400) are in the United States. It is estimated that approximately 65% of all YFU participants (approximately 155,000) were involved in an exchange with the U.S., either as an outbound American or an inbound international student. Their exchange not only impacted and touched

the lives of their natural families, host families, teachers, host communities and friends, but it also impacted their own lives during their overseas experience, as well as throughout their lives.

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Youth For Understanding has been like my own baby. I came to an early realization that here was a people-oriented program with an identity of its own, with tremendous possibilities for developing understanding with an ultimate goal of world peace, given to me to guide and direct through its formative years. Why me? I will never know. I do know that I was given strength, courage and leadership to create and develop Youth For Understanding. I did not do it alone. There are people by the thousand who have given of themselves to make this dream come true. It became their dream, too.”

- Dr. Rachel Andresen

Many YFU alumni use their exchange as a foundation for the path they will take throughout their lives from their university studies to their career choices. Many alumni quickly admit that their exchange impacted the way they look at different peoples, cultures and languages, as well as the way they now view their own society. Because of the value they gained from their YFU program, many of our alumni become volunteers for the organization. While there are currently 1,400 volunteers in the U.S., over the past 58 years there have been a great many more who have not only impacted and supported the YFU students, host families, schools and their communities, but through their experiences as a volunteer, continue to impact the world and propel YFU's mission.

The impact that YFU students, host families and volunteers have had in the United States and around the world is exponential. YFU students today continue to gain the skills and perspectives necessary to meet the challenges and reap the benefits from the opportunities that a fast-changing global community has to offer. Youth For Understanding continues to be defined by Rachel's vision and her commitment to international youth exchange.

Sources

Much of the detailed information about Rachel Andresen's life was provided by Mr. Ulrich Zahlten, Chairman of the Board of YFU USA. Mr. Zahlten was a YFU exchange student from Germany to the U.S. for the 1953-54 academic year. In 1957, along with other YFU program returnees, Mr. Zahlten established the YFU Germany office. He was elected Chairman (a volunteer position) which he and served in that role until 1997. During his years working with YFU Germany, he developed a close working relationship with Rachel Andresen. Mr. Zahlten is now an honorary Chairman of YFU Germany. In 2001 Mr. Zahlten retired from the High Court of Hamburg, Germany where he served as Presiding Judge from 1986-2001 and Associate Judge from 1970-1986.

Additional Sources: Rachel Andresen's Curriculum Vitae, and Rachel Andresen's Memoirs

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