

# ONE EXCHANGE, TWO PERSPECTIVES

**Richard Murray (Australia) and Laurel Macdonald (Canada) share their experience thus far on their current job exchange**

## Richard Murray

To say that participating in a teacher exchange to another country is a magnificent experience is an understatement. The past few years, since my wife and I first decided to explore the option of a Canadian couple going on a school exchange, have been an amazing adventure into the unknown.

While the teaching aspect of things is both familiar and different, simultaneously, it is the opportunities to explore a new country or two while you undertake your teaching duties that makes it truly wonderful.

Although I was contracted to start teaching at Holy Trinity Catholic High School, in Kanata, on January 31, 2018, we flew into Los Angeles on December 31, 2017. My wife and I had previously discussed doing a west coast USA/Canadian tour, and this exchange provided the perfect confluence of circumstances that meant we could travel for a month on the west coast before I had to start teaching.

We spent time exploring what Los Angeles and San Francisco had to offer, then flew to Calgary to start the Canadian leg of our holiday, which involved stays at Banff, Lake Louise, Jasper, Whistler, Whitehorse, and Vancouver. During this time, we engaged in such adventures as walking the Johnson Canyon in Banff, in -28 degree temperatures; a dog sled ride in Jasper; a horse sleigh ride at Lake Louise; a nighttime snowcat ride in Whistler to the top of a mountain for a fondue meal; snowshoeing and staying up to see the Aurora Borealis on Tagish Lake, Whitehorse, in -23 temperatures at 2 a.m. (not to mention a perfectly clear view of the Milky Way); a foodie tour of Granville Island Markets in Vancouver; and many other little walks and trips around, which allowed us to see as much as we could of these locations.

Since arriving in Ottawa, I have been busy adjusting my mindset to teaching in a Canadian high school, and especially teaching Grade 9 and 10 students, which I had never done before, having retrained in 2004 and

landing my first job in 2005 teaching at a senior campus (akin to Grades 11 and 12 in Canada). I have found this quite challenging, but also very rewarding, as the kids here have been great and the support from the teaching, administration, and management staff has been outstanding!

My busy teaching schedule has not stopped us from including some other adventures, with trips to Montreal, New York City, and Niagara Falls, to name some recent highlights, as well as trips around the Ottawa area to take in the local sights. The Canadian League for Educational Exchange recently conducted two days of professional development, which included a reception by the Australian High Commissioner, Her Excellency Natasha Smith, which was a highlight on the social side of things here for my wife and me. The exchange teachers and our family members who attended felt very much at home and valued as “unofficial ambassadors” in a little piece of Australia, here in Canada.

The main difficulty we have found is living and working in a foreign country seems like home, but in so many ways is very different. No such thing as “snow days” back in Australia. Milk in plastic bags? At the same time, it is good to see how other countries approach the teaching of your subject, and to consider what is similar, but also what is done differently and potentially better, which you can assimilate into your teaching, and use upon your return. I have been inspired by some of the approaches taken by the English department staff here and have already considered how I will incorporate them into my practice when I return to Australia.

I would thoroughly recommend a teacher from either Australia or Canada seriously consider taking on an exchange. Yes, there is a lot of paper work and toing and froing involved in organizing your exchange, but all that quickly fades into the background once you arrive and take on the many wonderful experiences working and living in a foreign country, and seeing all it has to offer.

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## Laurel Macdonald

When I turned 40 almost two years ago, I decided that I would use the year to try to accomplish 40 new things. So, on a whim, my husband and I submitted an application to go on a teacher exchange, fully expecting to be denied since we were almost a month past the due date. To our surprise, just four months later, we were signing a contract to move across the world to the Land Down Under, Australia.

It is hard to believe it has already been more than a year since our son vehemently resisted the move to Australia, not understanding how leaving his family, friends, hockey, home, and dog could be a good thing. My husband walked away from his job of seven years not knowing if there would be work available for him when we landed in Oz, while my daughter worried about sharks and blue bottles, spiders and snakes. In truth, it is unfathomable that I actually signed the contract to move to Australia, because everything I researched on the internet, or was told by well-meaning friends, was of the dangers that my family may encounter. Every rational part of my brain screamed for me to renege, and warned me that this move was a selfish decision that could traumatize my children and put my family's economic security and physical safety in jeopardy.

But, before I could rationalize my way out of the contract, we were already stretching our legs after a 24-hour flight, while strolling on the Sydney Harbour boardwalk. Literally, in that moment our inbox chimed announcing an incoming email, which detailed a one-year contract for my husband, located just ten minutes from our Australian home. Then, on our drive to Newcastle, the palm trees and stunning scenery consistently took our breath away, while the laidback surfing culture lulled us into a sense of security, only for us to be abruptly shaken into the reality of our culture shock by the beautiful birds that were surprisingly more intimidating than the snakes, spiders, and sharks, combined.

In the beginning, every day had a learning curve. I giggled often as I walked away from cashiers, wondering what offer I just turned down because I could not quite understand the lingo. I also hung my head low more than once, contemplating how to empower my children who, on one occasion, turned to me and said, "I just can't handle one more new thing." And, of course, I swallowed my pride as I drove on the opposite side of the road, or when I attended staff events where I walked aimlessly hoping to see a familiar face.

Now, my husband admits that he has loved every minute of what he calls the best and most surreal year of his life, having composed a list of accomplishments from golfing with kangaroos to exploring a large territory with colleagues who have truly become mates. I gained a full year of exemplary professional development. Meanwhile, my children excelled in the swimming and athletics carnivals; performed in a book parade, Easter hat parade, and school musical; won spelling bees, tennis competitions, and student council seats; and made lifelong

friends. Recently, my son performed a speech in front of his Year 5 cohort in which he admitted that "sometimes the most difficult things are the most rewarding."

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So, here we sit, having experienced the highs of holding koalas, lizards, and pythons, mingling with kangaroos, feeding a giraffe, snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef, surfing the ocean waves, battling a surprisingly strong current and coming out champions, eating delicious desserts during our new favourite time of day: morning tea, and riding camels on the most beautiful beach we had ever encountered in our lives. We met fellow Canadian exchange families who have been great travel companions and supports, and we have become closely connected with Australian colleagues and neighbours who have developed into family.

So what does a typical day look like for a Canadian exchange teacher in Australia?

Every moment, I discover a magic that has awoken me from the monotonous 9-5 sleepwalk that could be midlife, even when doing such simplistic chores as hanging laundry on the line. Now, I giggle when I walk away from the cashier and realize that I understood every word and even responded with an accidental "heaps," "fair dinkum," "no dramas," or "too easy." I laugh with a new understanding of Australian humour, and I am no longer shocked when someone asks for my thongs or a rubber!

And, I am empowered when I navigate the halls of my school or the streets of Newcastle and Sydney with a comfort that calls for me to actively remind myself that I am not at home. So, if you are questioning whether this adventure is one that you would dare to attempt, I implore you to take the advice of David McCullough and "resist the easy comforts of complacency," because the challenges and rewards are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities that my family and I are so happy we had the courage to embrace.

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Laurel Macdonald is a teachers at Holy Trinity Catholic High School in Kanata, Ontario.

