

A school pioneer

East Aurora's Carol Dooley is heading off to Thailand as the high school's first exchange student in decades

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By Chris Daly STAFF WRITER

Carol Dooley has put East Aurora High School on the board. Or maybe more appropriately, she has put the school on the map.

The 16-year-old is headed to Thailand for the upcoming school year through the Rotary International Outbound Exchange Program, making her the first East Aurora High School student to participate in an exchange program in nearly two decades.

"It's a great experience," Dooley said. "Travel the world, learn another culture."

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Carol Dooley, 16, tries to figure out what she's going to pack in her suitcase in the bedroom she shares with her older sister in their Aurora home.

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Carol Dooley (right) checks the mail with her older sister, Sarah, on the porch of their east Aurora home. Dooley, who will be a junior at East Aurora High School, is the first person from the school to participate in an exchange program in nearly two decades. She will spend the next school year as a student in Thailand.

photos by HEATHER EIDSON/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

According to Rotary's district Web site, it has been sending Aurora teenagers to study around the world for more than a quarter century. While West Aurora has had 37 students study abroad since the 1998-99 school year, East Aurora has never had a student involved with the program.

"Basically, (it) comes down to resources," said Rotary's long-term outbound coordinator Jon Haesler. "As a volunteer organization, we aren't able to go out to all the schools."

Dooley, who recently completed her sophomore year, learned about the program while attending a leadership conference, where she was introduced to different foreign exchange students.

"She happened to hear about the exchange program there and it caught her interest," Haesler said.

After applying for the program, she received an interview and was later accepted. She then had to rank the top 30 countries she wanted to travel to -- Thailand was third on her list.

"I met someone from there and she was really nice," Dooley said. "I just decided Thailand is completely different than anything else."

The goal of the program is for the students to present America in a good light to people of other countries.

"(The) overall mission is to be ambassadors," Haesler said. "We don't want someone to be a stereotypical American."

Part of being a responsible ambassador means avoiding the "four Ds": drugs, drinking, driving and dating. Dooley is ready to represent her country and hopes to change some people's perceptions about the U.S.

"I plan on doing that by being myself, being understanding," she said. "Basically, just showing not all Americans are not understanding."

Gaining understanding

Understanding is a critical aspect of Rotary International's mission, as their ideology maintains it is essential for peace. Haesler cited a former Rotary president who claimed if every high school student traveled abroad, there would be no more wars.

"After you live with someone and are friends with them, it's hard to wage war against them," Haesler said.

Dooley said lack of understanding is a huge problem in society, noting how oblivious she thinks much of her age group is to the real reasons behind many global issues.

"Especially when you're in high school, your focus is just so self-involved," she said. "You're thinking you're having such a bad time. Then when you hear about things happening in the world, you have no idea why these things are going on."

As the first East Aurora student to use the program, Dooley hopes her travels will lead to greater global understanding among her peers by influencing them to travel abroad as well. Apparently she has already had an effect, as a guidance counselor at East Aurora recently told her five students had inquired about foreign exchange programs.

"It makes me feel pretty happy," she said. "I think if people spent more time in other countries, we could be more understanding."

Learn the language

While in Thailand, she will live with a host family and attend a regular Thai high school, where she won't even be able to communicate until she can speak the language. In fact, not only does Dooley not know how to speak Thai, she also doesn't know much about the country itself.

"I know that it is in Aisa. I know that it is a constitutional monarchy," she said.

For Dooley's parents, having their youngest of three children heading off to a country she knows little about brings about a mix of emotions.

"There's the nervousness of my little tiny baby girl going all the way around the world," said Carol's father, Jeffrey Dooley. "There is an immense amount of pride (as well) that she was accepted into the program."

The elder Dooley said the Rotary program is great because along with training the students, it also prepares parents to handle their teenagers being overseas for so long. He noted the program provides plenty of support for the students while their traveling and ensures communication between families and students is maintained throughout the trip.

"It's not like she's going alone when it gets right down to it," he said, also adding his daughter is used to being a minority as a Caucasian

attending East Aurora.

"It's prepared me a little bit because of the fact its 70 percent Hispanic and 10 percent white," Carol said. "I'm pretty used to it. It may be kind of different (though) in a completely Asian country where the whole country is different."

Regardless of how prepared Dooley's life experiences have made her, she fully expects to be homesick.

"I know I am (going to be homesick), especially around the holidays when my brother is home and my sister is home," she said. "For the most part, I'm just going to work through it."

Dooley leaves for her trip on Aug. 2 and will return from Thailand next June.

"I want to get the most out of it," she said. "I expect to have a great time, that's the main expectation. Other than that, I hope everyone will be nice and will be helpful."