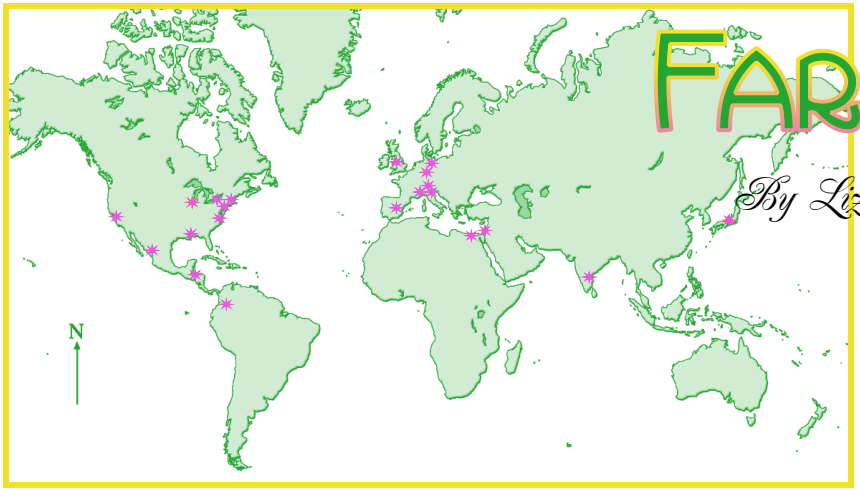
Youth Initiative High School
Kaleidoscope
Summer 2013

Where it has taken us

Across town and across the world, to the frayed ends of sanity and the tranquil center of the soul, to a vision of the future and an understanding of the past; Youth Initiative is a different journey for everyone lucky enough to get on board. This is a school where the learning is not confined to the students. Teachers and parents grow and evolve beside their students which is why Youth Initiative is more than just a school, it's a community. Like any community, each individual member experiences YIHS differently. On one thing, though, we can all agree: our experience at YIHS has led us to do things, think thoughts, and go places we would never have done or thought or gone. It takes us all to different places but it always returns us to where we belong: home. In this issue we explore a few of the places it has taken us. Where has it taken you?



Some of the places it's taken us.

Fare Thee Well

By Liz Cox, Administrator

I watched the Youth Initiative in its earliest years from across the asphalt at Pleasant Ridge. My children were 8 and 5 and I was pretty nervous about the group of teenagers that had moved in next door. Each week they seemed to adopt a different disturbing fashion trend. They sat on the ledge outside the windows of the upper landing, laughing with abandon and generally acting like they owned everything within view of and including the Landmark Center. I'm sure I bustled my sons in and out of their own school so as to minimize visual contact.

Eventually I came to know more and more of those teens as individuals, and I remember hearing one of them say, clearly mystified and disappointed, "It almost seems like the adults are *afraid* of us!" By that time I had begun to see her perspective, even

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Every other year YIHS junior and senior Spanish students have the opportunity to embark on, what is for many, a life-changing adventure. Led by YIHS faculty, students visit the tiny Central American nation of Guatemala where they absorb the culture, history, and language of this fascinating place, all while participating in a wide variety of service projects. It is the capstone to our comprehensive Spanish language program, and it is so much more than that.

How It Was

By Kate Buche-Pattison, Class of

"So Kate," they will say, "how was Guatemala?" I know they will ask this just like they asked, "So Kate, how was Germany?"

And I will probably say something like: "It was wonderful," or, "it was a great experience." Because how do you express the force of those three weeks in a couple of sentences? How can I impart even a fraction of what my journey was? How can I communicate something so big in so few words? Some people ask this question because they are really burning to know what I have experienced, and some just need a topic of conversation. Some are content with my one word summaries, and some askers press for details, in which case I usually summarize what did: "Well, we flew into Guatemala City, and then…" The places we went and things we did follow chronologically. But this answer doesn't really cover it either. Because the experience of Guatemala isn't just encapsulated in what we did, the experience of Guatemala was the sights, the sounds, the smells, the feelings, just as much as it was the actions we performed and the places we went.

I suppose it is always like this when communicating an experience to someone who has to imagine everything. Since they don't know the place, the atmosphere—it is hard, and I know it can never be he same as what I am trying precisely to convey. But still, the urge to tell the story is strong in me, and I hope my watery words can paint a scene half as vivid as the vibrant world I glimpsed for three short weeks. I hope you can begin to smell a hint of fresh tortillas cooking on an open wood fire. The smoke mingling with the coarse maize dough as it is clapped into discs and baked; the precise aroma that wafted over me, a greeting, as I entered the humble corrugated tin cooking hut of my host mother, Josefina. Because this is part of how Guatemala smells to me.

YIHS students Kate (left) and Grace relax with some new friends.

Maybe your throat will ache a little as mine did, inhaling the diesel exhaust heavy in the air, as we navigated through the tangle of honking chicken busses, with bulging backpacks and aching shoulders, searching for the right one to board.

If you close your eyes maybe you could see the pattern of luscious green hills folding around and above me, feel the wind buffeting your face a little like when I craned my neck out the window of the microbus, straining to hold the view in sight for as long as possible. Maybe you can taste the coffee, so watery and sugar loaded, yet it is somehow the best drink in the world, when topped with an eager, toothless smile from a well-worn face, hoping I

will like this, the best they have.

Can you hear the gravelly voice of Avelino, as it pauses in his story of struggle and hardship; pauses, remembering? Can you hear him continue, struggling with the pain made fresh in the retelling, the sadness that resurfaces in his eyes as the story of injustice is shared with us openly, though not without effort?

Maybe you can imagine the feeling of the speed bump under the sardine tin chicken bus that knocks my shoulder into the baby sleeping on his mother's back next to me, and then into the man standing in the aisle as the bus barrels on around a curve in the mountain road.

Kate poses with her Guatemalan host mother.

Maybe I can make the image of two-year-old Fabiola, with beans smeared from her grinning cheeks to her elbows, as she bounces on her exhausted mother's knee, as fresh in your mind as it is in mine. Could you picture the exact hue of Fabi's 13-year-old sister Angelica's eyes as she tells me she can't come to my graduation, because she has to work on the coffee plantation that day? Could you ever picture the desire in those eyes, the wish that she could come? Could you imagine feeling the tug of an unfamiliar little brown hand on your shirt, as you hang your wash on the barbed -wire fence, and could you imagine the expectant face asking in rapid fire Spanish what your name is, and if you want to play? Could you imagine watching your tentative smile turning into that same grin with a reeling background, as you spin, first Lolita, then her sister around and around in a dizzying game? The echo of the pounding percussion of rain on the corrugated metal roof as an accompaniment to the crescendo of the trilingual jam session; that echo might reach you.

Maybe you can hear the tonal variation between the honk (and accompanying facial expression) that means either: "Get the hell out of my way before I run you over!" or "Hey, chica!" Maybe my burning guilt is imaginable, as we pass a crippled man on the street (one of many) begging and I feel the coins heavy in my pocket. You might smile as I tell you about the sweet, ancient, Mayan woman sitting on the curb with the red ribbon braided into her hair, how she blushed and giggled, proud, as I asked to take a picture of her hair. You might smile wryly, as I did, at the irony of the pristine mountain view marred by a sign that it is prohibited to throw garbage there, and the accompanying pile of trash at its feet. The sound might reach you of the neighborhood dogs, locked in a vicious vocal battle every night. Maybe the feeling of ridiculousness can be imagined of bouncing in the back of a microbus to help gain traction as Emilio, our driver, gunned it up the detour around the landslide that had wiped out the road. Perhaps you will sweat, imagining the scalding heat of the steaming mountain hot springs, or pucker, imagining that the sulfurous water tasted of lemons. If you close your eyes maybe you will glimpse the rainbow spilling from the lakeside tourist markets, and you may gag imagining the sickening odor of the indoor market—warm raw meat mingled with laundry detergent being sold at neighboring shops. Maybe it is possible for me to convey a little of the triumphant smile of understanding I shared when I realized I understood, and made my point clear, when communication happened, with or without language.

This is all only a pinch of how Guatemala tasted, smelled, sounded, looked, and felt to me, only a slice of this vibrant culture and land that I was lucky enough to visit for these three packed weeks. Three weeks that I will always remember. Three weeks I can only tell you about, and not expect you to fully comprehend. How could you without being there? Three weeks that changed me. The girl who got on the plane at O'Hare excited, was not the same girl who got off the plane 22 days later, wiser. So, how was Guatemala, you ask? I already told you; it was wonderful.

Adventures in B-More

By Cecilia Kouba, Class of 2015

Back in 1996, students and parents of Youth Initiative High School (YIHS) started to create their own school. They never would have guessed that sixteen years later a group of people in Baltimore would be so interested and inspired by our little school, that they would start to go through their own process of creating a high school with the same ideas. The Baltimore Youth Initiative High School (BYI) is a brand new school that has just shoved off into the great journey of life and creation.

Just this past November Eleanore, Jacob, and I went to Baltimore to mentor, help teach, and inspire the students. The adventure began with a thrilling 18-hour car ride. We battled our boredom by rocking out to music almost the whole time, interspersed, of course, with interesting tidbits from Jacob about the towns and states we drove through. For instance "This is the town Michael Jackson was born in" (when we were driving by Gary, Indiana.) I noticed that as our moods changed so did the genre of music. We went from being extremely charged with energy and listening to some energetic music to being exhausted and listening to Enya as we drifted to sleep. As soon as we woke up the morning after arriving we got back in the red van and zoomed our way through the streets and arrived at the school. Leaping out of the car we lugged all of the school supplies that Jacob brought from Viroqua up the stairs and into the school and began.

BYI is very small; there are only nine students, seven girls, and two boys. While we were there we stayed with two families from the school. Eleanore and I shared a bed and neither of us was used to that so it turned out that Eleanore slept up against the wall, while I sprawled out taking up all the bed and blankets. After a couple of exhausting days full of exploring, learning and eating I figured out how to leave room for Eleanore, and our eyes slammed shut as soon as our heads hit the pillows.

Food ended up being an important part of our trip. Jacob taught a cooking class and, of course, we had to eat. When we were out of the house we decided to live it up. We ate Mexican, Ethiopian, Vietnamese, and Thai. Coming from Viroqua, Wisconsin it was quite an excursion deciding where to eat. It was wonderful to have so many options and at the same time ended up making it hard to decide *what* to eat.

This happened on the road when we were in Cleveland; it took us at least 30 minutes to decide where to eat. If we were in Viroqua it would have been easy: the Driftless or Dave's Pizza. Within walking distance of our hotel there were at least five places to eat. Out of those places most of them were steak houses. I found out that we are either all indecisive people, or none of us wanted to make someone else eat something they didn't like. So we paced up and down a busy street asking each other what we should eat. It was one of those times when someone asks, "What do you want to eat?" And the other person says "I don't care. What do you want to eat?" Finally, I decided I wanted to eat fish and chips and pointed to a restaurant called The Bone Fish Grill, and we made our way across the road and down a sidewalk and through the doors. I got my fish and chips and by the time we were all done eating we were stuffed and there was a map of the east coast drawn by Jacob on the paper tablecloth in a helpful act to show us where we were in relation to everything else.

Cecilia wields a mean spatula.

BYI started up this fall after the Baltimore

Waldorf High School closed down. The students and teachers at BYI felt that the school system in Baltimore was not the best. The private schools were not very good and were too expensive, and the public schools weren't designed to encourage the students to be their best. They were mostly designed to keep kids off the streets. One of the full time teachers at BYI used to work at what they considered to be the worst school in Baltimore. He said that the school didn't even have an attendance policy and that there were stabbings in the parking lot. And that is one of the reasons they started BYI, because this group of people wanted to create a school for students to reach their highest potential and achieve excellence.

Jacob and biscuits; now we're teaching!

It didn't take us long to settle in, and soon enough we were lying on the floor stretching and groaning. It seemed to be universally accepted that the "Misconsins," which was the nickname that Eleanore and I acquired, were some wacky foreigners. Maybe we were getting a little too comfortable. As the days past we taught each other more about our schools. We found out that their building also has a heating problem. If you go to YIHS you understand how annoying our heating system is. It gets extremely hot then freezing cold and sometimes there is a loud banging. Well, theirs has a loud roaring and it seems to annoy them as much as it bothers us—just another thing that ties us together.

After the first week in Baltimore we got back in the car and drove to Washington D.C. The sun was setting by the time we made it down town. All the important buildings of our country were closed so we decided to walk down the National Mall. The National Mall turned out to be a lot longer than it looked, so by the time we were at the other end the sky was black. The whole walk was long and tiring but it was a magnificent experience to see all the beautiful monuments and memorials that I had never seen before in real life. Once the long trek was over we found our way through the maze of streets and happily consumed some delicious Ethiopian Food.

While we were in Baltimore we learned some of the interesting characteristics of that area. The students said that some people say "dug" instead of "dog" and "wooder" instead of "water." We also were taught how to eat whole crabs. In B-more (B-more is a nickname some locals use,) seafood is BIG, because it is right on the Chesapeake Bay. If you have ever eaten crabs you understand how it is far from genteel. The process starts by breaking the crab up with what ever you have—a mallet or a knife for example. Then you take out all the bad parts that you don't want to eat and eat whatever is left. When we sat down and opened the bag, the crabs looked alive. After closer examination we realized it was because they we boiled and coated in Old Bay seasoning and the Old Bay made the crabs look like they were covered in sand and mud. The experience turned out to be fantastic and when we were done there was food on the wall and smiles on our faces.

I used to think that I had no stories to tell people, but it turns out that going away to a place that was so different from what I was used to automatically made me full of stories. Everything I thought was common knowledge to my friends and family, turned out to be fun and interesting stories to people that know nothing about me, or where I come from. This trip to Baltimore helped me to grow and become more educated about life outside Viroqua, Wisconsin. Baltimore was an amazing experience. It was great to meet people who live in a completely different environment and who share the same feelings about Waldorf-inspired education.

Eleanore fraternizes with BYIHS students and staff.

A Very Special Day

Chenou Moore

Nora Finnerty

Corinne Horan

Sam Varney

Sunday, June 2nd, Youth Initiative High School sent another wonderful class of young adults off into the world. Above us the sun shone brightly in a sky dotted with wispy, hopeful clouds. Beneath us the lush grass held our feet fast to the earth. All around us were the sounds and smells and spirit of the Kickapoo River Valley.

Friends, family, teachers, and alumni all gathered together at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve nature center to mark one of the most important rites of passage in a young person's life. The ceremony began with two thoughtful speeches by teachers Matthew Voz and Jackie Kolenko, with a rousing musical flourish to conclude Ms. Kolenko's commencement speech.

The first annual Head, Heart, and Hands scholarship was awarded by the faculty to Christine Zinky for her four years of academic, artistic, and social excellence. After a moving song from our seniors' parents, each senior shared some of their thoughts on this most momentous of occasions. Each name was called and each graduate rose to receive that most hallowed of symbols: the diploma, a physical manifestation of four years of challenge and growth.

The ceremony concluded, graduation-goers were treated to a massive potluck compliments of YIHS parents. When all had their fill the ceremony became quite unceremonious, as faculty were dunked in a tank of icy water, much to the excitement of the students. The first ever Intergenerational Olympics ended in a tie and as the sun began to set we all dispersed, satiated with food and drink, exhausted from raucousness, but most of all, proud of the ten wonderful people that make up the YIHS Class of 2013!

Genevieve Breitbach

Christine Zinky

Ayana Perry

Class of 2013

Jasmine Jamila-Wuerth

Katie-Mae Lamb

Grace Hallberg-Cain

Liz Cox, Le Grande Dame

(Continued from page 1)

as I remembered my own reactions.

Now, my own sons have come and gone through this school and I have come to know lots and lots of teenagers through my work here. No longer scary, these young people and all their shenanigans represent enormous potential for a meaningful, enthusiastically-lived life.

Our school, itself a teenager like most of its daily occupants, has been teetering for a long time on the brink between *potential* and *deed*, and it feels like the forces of the parents and students, the faculty, the Board, and our generous donors, are aligning to carry us into a new and action-packed phase of existence. Where we have always had the potential, we now need only the will to accomplish our goals.

This move from potential into deed requires a generous measure of confidence *and* the ability to objectively self-assess. And these qualities are ones that have obviously developed here over the past few years.

There has been a marked and maturing confidence in the faculty. This bright and energetic group of people continues to work and grow with admirable collegiality and sincere striving. They have begun to embrace *form* as a vehicle for *freedom*. A very important example of this was when Jacob developed a formal credit system, which ultimately freed the entire faculty to give our students a true gift – the ability to experience failure, without it meaning utter defeat. It's easy to understand the value of failure in our own lives as adults, but until a couple of years ago, failing a class or two pretty much meant the end of a student's career here, and faculty members were understandably reluctant to be the one to flip that switch. Through the articulation of a comprehensive credit structure, the focus can remain on the four-year picture - and still accurately reflect the work produced in a class. It seems to have bolstered both our faculty's confidence and the way they value their own work.

This past fall, Michael D'Aleo, a Waldorf high school science teacher from Saratoga Springs, NY, came to visit. He's a remarkable and sensitive teacher and he spoke to us about technology and the need to keep observing how we interact with it and the effect it has on us. During his stay he remarked on the amazing "life force" he sensed in our students—noteworthy among the many schools he had visited.

My first thought was, "Of course. They have a voice." And of course I realize it's more— and more complicated—than that. Our students have countless other advantages that contribute to what lives in them. But I've come to appreciate another valuable aspect of our school that continues to be refined and developed: formal student feedback.

Student feedback comes to us (*us* being both the Personnel Committee, which has student, faculty, parent, and Board representation, and the Faculty Mentor, a.k.a. Jacob) through formal surveys conducted at the end of each block. The surveys contain questions about the course content and the teacher, and several items like these: *Describe your participation in the class. Describe your attitude toward this class and how it affected your learning.*

Sometimes the responses we get to these surveys are perfunctory, glib, or even resentful. And sometimes they're thoughtful, insightful, fair-minded, and helpful. Either way, part of the point is that *we ask*. It seems very important that we provide regular opportunities to practice evaluation and self-evaluation, for engaging and training ourselves in a regular habit of self-review is a path toward true progress: How have I contributed to the situation that I'm in? How can I improve it? How can I improve myself?

We are often questioned about the appropriateness of having students involved in the personnel and curriculum decisions in our school, but it's really just the next step on the path of self-observation. Reading through and analyzing feedback surveys, reviewing the curriculum, its pace, and the placement of classes within the cycle of the year while being able to communicate what it was like to actually be in the classes - these exercises give students a chance to

participate in the school's own process of self-observation and assessment.

This summer marks the end of our 17th year at YIHS, and it marks the end of my tenure as Administrator here. The intention behind this school is one of noble transparency and objective honesty, and the people who carry this forward inspire within me an awesome gratitude each year. Thanks to the relentless productivity and clear-eyed assessment of teachers and staff members like Jacob Hundt and Matt Voz, this school will step confidently into its years of *deed*.

I love this school and have the deepest respect for those who have made its success their priority.

Half Way Around the World

By Namthip Nilawong, Class of 2014

Namthip in Thailand (left) and in the considerably cooler climes of Wisconsin.

My name is Namthip Nilawong, everyone calls me Nam, I'm originally from Thailand. This year is my 3rd year in the US, and I will be a senior next year. I lived at the orphanage back in Thailand and they gave me a great opportunity to come to study in the US, I was very excited and ready to leave my home town. I was 15 when I left Thailand, I was in the plane for about 20 hours, and I thought to myself, "Wow this is going to be a big change in my life." When the plane landed at the LaCrosse airport somebody picked me up and drove me to Viroqua, I looked out the windows on both sides of the road, it was not what I expected, but I told myself, "Oh well, I'm here now, and I'm going to make the best out of it." My English was not that good then, because not everyone speaks English in Thailand, although I did learn English when I was in middle school, but having to talk in English all the time was still a big problem for me.

I was very excited to meet everyone at the camping trip my freshman year, I got to know some people, but unfortunately I wasn't able to talk to them that much, because I didn't really understand what they were saying to me. The camping trip didn't go really well that year, because it was raining really hard, everything was all flooded, and some people came back early, including me. The first week of school was not as bad as I thought it would be, although I was the only one there that wasn't American. I tried to understand what everyone said and learned as much as I could. I got very stressed by the end of the day for about two months, because everything here is different and I got very homesick. I almost felt like it was a different life. As time went by things got better, I am able to talk to people more and understand what they are saying to me, it took me about 2 months to remember the names of everyone in the

school without messing it up. I enjoy my life here much more when I can talk and have conversations with people, everyone here is very nice and kind. I really like the way that the teachers care about every student, because there are only about 40 students in the school. My old school has about 800 students, and I like it here much better. My first year went by really slowly, that was how I felt at least, by the end of the year I had decided that I wanted to come back again, and I was lucky enough to get to come back! I went back to Thailand for the summer and got a five-year visa. I admit that it was hard for me to come back, because it was very nice to see everyone again and have that feeling of being home.

I finally came back for my sophomore year, and continued my life in the US. This year was much better than the first year, because I could speak and understand English. All the seniors were gone and new freshman came, that also meant I made more friends and had more names to remember, I hungout with friends that I made, and that is one of my favorite things about being here. My second year in the US, went by faster than the first year, I also got a chance to go back and visit my hometown last summer. Everyone was very happy to see me. It was nice to spend time with my friends and family. I had a great time there even though it was a short period of time. I had decided that I was going to come back to the US, and finish high school.

I am a junior this year, and my English is getting much better; I dream in English, and I think in English. I got very homesick sometime during the year as usual, but I also almost feel like I belong here. School is getting harder every year as it should be, but I very much enjoy learning. I feel like my life is getting better than it ever has before. I'm very grateful that I get to be here, to spend my teenage life here, as my family said, "You are such an American now." I think it's true, because I've changed so much from where I came from or in other words, I'm growing up and I feel like I'm part of you guys now, it is like a new, different life.

I can't wait for next year, I'm sure it's going to be one of the good years, because I'm a senior now. I'm looking forward to the new beginning and new adventure.

Door County Drifter

By Nora Finnerty, Class of 2013

Nora and her mom (a while back).

When I started high school I didn't really know what to expect. I was in Sturgeon Bay, WI attending the public school there with no high expectations. In public school, everything is very uniform. You went to classes with about 20+ kids in the room, the hallways all looked the same, the food was always the same, even the people started looking the same. I never thought there was anything else out there. As far as I knew, this was the norm and I was just another average person making their way thought the public school institution.

When I heard about Youth Initiative I thought that it must be too good to be true. A school without grades, a lounge with couches, and the freedom to choose what you study? It seemed like a pretty far out idea. I did a little research and read a Kaleidoscope. My first thought was, "How

do I get into a school like this?" So I called Youth Initiative with the hopes of attending the next term, and also in hopes of a place to live.

Skipping ahead to finding a place to live, Matt Voz and his family graciously opened up their home to me, while starting my sophomore year at YIHS. I was really nervous the day the annual camping trip started, worried about making friends easily and about whether or not these people would accept this average public school girl. To my delight, the people were more than welcoming and were genuinely interested in my story and how I came to be at this unique school. I told them that I was just disappointed with how the public school system puts everyone in one box and if you didn't fit inside of their mold, how you were either left behind or thought of a radical freak. One year turned into three and I am now a proud alumna of Youth Initiative High School. I have made many friends along the way and had so many life changing and thought provoking experiences that have shaped my life in a new way. Youth Initiative showed me how to be an independent thinker and my own person. It showed me that I can really make a difference in this world and that in fact, I was not an average teen, I was an individual with my own morals and ideas. I couldn't imagine myself at a public school when I was in classes at YIHS that were able to get into long open discussions and debates. Which is one thing that I absolutely loved. As a very strong headed and opinionated person, being able to talk to my peers seriously about topics such as religion, morals, and government; it really put a lot in perspective for me, it is something that I never would have gotten if I had stayed in the public school system.

Nora, fully grown (almost) and ready to change the world.

Going home to Sturgeon Bay and telling my friends about YIHS, most of them thought I was either going to Hogwarts or had turned into some kind of radical hippie. I would tell them that it's a school that lets students think for themselves and taught them so many life skills that really got them ready for the real world. We were problem solvers, independent thinkers, and people who really loved the idea of learning and sharing ideas. These are very important skills that I think many people don't get the chance to practice in the public school system. I am nothing but thankful for the person Youth Initiative and the community of Viroqua has formed me to be. I feel confident in who I am and am going out into world and sharing my views and seeing the changes that need to happen and acting upon them to make this world a better place for everyone.

I was definitely spoiled with the chance to attend such an amazing school with people who are there because they want to be there, people who love learning and sharing their thoughts with others. I can only hope to encounter more people like this in the world. Youth Initiative has changed the course of my life drastically and I am nothing but a better person for it. I can't believe I am this lucky to have met so many great people and had so many amazing opportunities through the school. I can only hope that one day there will be more schools like Youth Initiative so that future generations will be able to have the experience I had — the world will be a better place for that. I need to thank all of the teachers who teach at YIHS, because they are not there for themselves, they are there because they love to share their vast knowledge and love the subjects they teach. YIHS is full of selfless people and I can only thank my lucky stars that I was able to be a part of this remarkable school. As I venture out into the world, I hope that what I do as an ambassador to this type of education will reflect positively on YIHS and that I will be able to take what it has taught and affect positive change.

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