

ReFlections of a 1999 Youth Ambassador and the path from Rio Grande do Sul to Indiana to Moscow, Russia.

My name is Helen Braun, I am a 26-year old journalist. I am living in Moscow during this year. On the day of my birthday (January 19th) I received an email from my Dad, Don Ester. It has been like this since 1999 – the year that I met my family. Yes: in the last ten years, I am a very special and happy person, with two very special families.

In 1999, I went to Indiana as a member of the Partners of America. I was 15 years old, and I really wanted to learn about something new. The purpose was: living with an American family, going to an American school, and doing some volunteer work. There is nothing better to really learn about another culture. So, five more teenagers and I went on that adventure.

I remember the first night that I spent at the Ester's family: I asked myself if I could afford that – I was very young and it was the first time I spent so long away from home. But, the Ester's became not just a host, but also a real family to me. Don, Carol, Nick, Erin and Katie knew exactly what to do: Don took me to the youth choir and to Ball State University – and there I learned about culture. Mom Carol helped me with the volunteer work: I was going to a nursery in a Kindergarten. There, I learned how children can make us more simple and happy. Erin – the sister who was close to my age – was my friend and we could discover together that even in Brazil, or in the United States, teenagers have the same fears, the same questions, and the same friendship.

Katie – the youngest – taught me how to be patient, and how brothers and sisters act the same way all over the world. With Nicole – the oldest – I discover how sweet and fun someone can be.

I also got a new brother: Jacob Nicholas. He hosted my brother Bruno Braun (some years later) and, after that, we hosted him in Brazil. He is a very special person who changed my Brazilian's family life - because everybody loved him. And, of course, we changed his life teaching him the real soccer game and made him one of our soccer team fans.

This experience totally changed my life. I could see another world: bigger, more interesting, and a world that needs someone to “discover” it. I've got many friends, I changed my way of seeing things. And it really helped me to know what I wanted: to be a journalist.

When I arrived in Indiana, I didn't know if I would be a doctor, or a ballerina. After that experience, I understood that I really want to know people – as a doctor – and to conduct the life in a beautiful way – as a ballerina. Being a Youth Ambassador showed me the way to happiness. After my journalism coursework, I started studying Anthropology, too. And now, I am spending this year working as a journalist in Russia. But I am pretty sure that these choices – this trip – started before: the courage, the curiosity to be always learning something new was given to me ten years ago. And, still, the experience that I had in Indiana is giving me its benefits. I have a new family, I've got new challenges. The only thing that really bothers me is that I miss my American family and friends a lot. But, I am always keeping them with me.