

Featured: SUPPORTIVE SISTERS: Clarke Central High School senior and Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis (left) and CCHS junior Tyus Dekle (right) stand on Dekle's front porch on Dec. 7, 2022. Dekle and her family have hosted Clarissa in their home since her arrival in the United States on Aug. 19, 2022 and the experience hosting Clarissa has helped Dekle in unimaginable ways. "I've dealt with a lot of mental stuff and depression and I didn't think this was going to do anything to it, but (I've) found that I've been doing better with another person," Dekle said. "This is really cheesy, but she has genuinely helped me through some like, deep stuff. So it has been such a great experience." Photo by Aza Khan





LIVING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis has been taking CCHS by storm during her senior year, despite it being her first living in the United States.

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With sunlight filtering through the windows of her family’s Italian countryside home, Clarke Central High School senior and Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis stares admiringly at the young girl on her television screen who is walking through the halls of her American

high school. However, Clarissa isn’t admiring the girl, but rather her school. Clarissa has dreamt of traveling to the United States because of American high school culture ever since she was a child, and in 2022, she was able to fulfill that dream through Cultural Homestay, a foreign exchange program based in San Rafael, California.

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Clarissa has dreamt of traveling to the United States because of American high school culture ever since she was a child, and in 2022, she was able to fulfill that dream through Cultural Homestay, a foreign exchange program based in San Rafael, California.

“America is seen as a dream in Europe, (and) especially in Italy, (because of) American high school. Football, cheerleading, we don’t have those things, (and) those things made an image of American high school that everybody (in Italy) wants to (experience),” Clarissa said. “This was one of the main (reasons why I wanted to come here).”

Before she moved to Athens on Aug. 19, 2022 to attend CCHS, Clarissa lived

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in Frascati, Italy, a small commune in the metropolitan city of Rome. In her free time, Clarissa would travel the 20 minutes to Rome with her friends to enjoy the city’s different environments and immerse herself in new experiences.

“It’s really easy to get into the city, so basically me and my friends, every weekend, we go there (and) we hang out,” Clarissa said. “When (you go), you always (meet) someone new because people like to introduce themselves and

it’s interesting because sometimes people that you see in Rome are from other parts of the city, which can be (fun).”

In Italy, Clarissa attended Liceo Classico M.T Cicerone High School, a high school with a focus on literature. Instead of participating in a K-12 education system

-- CLARISSA DE SANTIS,

Italian foreign exchange student and CCHS senior

like students do in the United States, Italian high schoolers attend specialized five-year high schools that focus on a certain subject. Although Clarissa enjoyed learning more about her desired subject, she believes the system has its flaws.

Above: LEARNING LITERATURE: Clarke Central High School senior and Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis sits and listens to a lesson in Room 231 on Dec. 8, 2022. Despite being from another country, Clarissa was able to jump into some challenging English classes at CCHS, including Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition and AP American Language and Composition. “When she was first introduced to us, I was personally very stressed out (in the class), and I just had a thought to myself like, ‘I could not imagine jumping into this right now,’” former AP Lit./Comp. student Amelia Baer said. “But she very quickly got caught up and I feel like I have a lot to learn from her because she has a very strong work ethic and she is always on top of things.” Photo by Lucas Donnelly



"You have the same classmates for five years because you're taking the same classes with them, so sometimes, it's hard because maybe you don't like someone and you have to spend six hours each day (with them) for five years," Clarissa said. "I decided to do this experience because I wanted to learn other subjects because I knew that (in the U.S.) you have different types of courses that you can take."

Once Clarissa decided to make the jump to Athens, she immediately started preparing for her new life. However, in the back of her mind, she had certain anxieties surrounding the move.

"I heard about other exchange students that are not in a good relationship with their host sisters because sometimes they're jealous, or they just don't feel them," Clarissa said. "This was one of my biggest fears because since I (am) only child, I (have) never had the opportunity to interact with other girls or boys of my age in the same house so it was (nerve-racking)."

Despite her preconceived notions, Clarissa made the trip. Once she finally arrived in Athens after a 14-hour flight to Atlanta, she was greeted by her American host family, including her host sister, CCHS junior Tyus Dekle. Though the two were both nervous to meet each other, they hit it off immediately and were able to form a strong bond.

"We clicked right away. We just vibed together, started talking and (now) we

hang out all the time," Dekle said. "She enjoys making friends and talking with people (so) she's got confidence, which is an attractive quality to me. She's just overall really easygoing and fun to hang around."

As the two have cemented their relationship during the semester, they've found common ground.

"We spend a lot of time together. Our favorite activities are probably singing in the car, going Downtown and shopping or simply staying at home and

(watching) movies," Clarissa said. "We (definitely) see our relationship more as a friendship than simply (a) host sister who's hosting (an) exchange student. Right now, I can tell that I definitely see her as a (friend), I trust her and we really love each other."

After taking a three-day period after her flight to settle in and get acclimated with her host family, Clarissa started at CCHS on Aug. 22, 2022. When she entered CCHS, she was immediately in awe of her new school environment, however, she was enrolled in a Literature 9 class, a course far below her skill level.

Quickly though, her academic potential was noticed by her school counselor, which resulted in a transfer to CCHS English department co-chair David Ragsdale's first period Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition class. CCHS senior Nico Willman was in the class with Clarissa in the fall of the 2022-2023 school year, and saw her growth throughout the semester.

"She came in with a lot of chemistry knowledge and (she was) one of the most diligent people in my class, if not the most. (She was) always on top of it, so what she's been able to do is incredible."

-- MATTHEW REGISTER,
CCHS science department teacher

“(At first) it was very difficult for her, but she picked it up really quick in the class, (and) it’s really cool to see her now,” Willman said. “She’s grown (so much) throughout the year. She’s participating in (Socratic) Seminars as much, if not more, than everyone else. She’s bringing in some good discussion points (and is) leaving everyone wowed.”

CCHS senior Amelia Baer was also in AP English Lit./Comp. with Clarissa, and found Clarissa’s ability to jump into an English-based class as an exchange student inspiring.

“When she was first introduced to us, I was personally very stressed out (in the class), and I just had a thought to myself like, ‘I could not imagine jumping into this right now,’” Baer said. “But she very quickly got caught up and I feel like I have a lot to learn from her because she has a very strong work ethic and she is always on top of things.”

Clarissa’s main anxiety when coming to the U.S. was her language barrier, but during her time in Athens, she has been able to confidently rid herself of that worry.

“I was worried (about people) coming to me because I was shy due to my English,” Clarissa said. “(However), I’ve been lucky because people that I (know) try to make me feel more confident and it’s probably thanks to my friends and my host family that I’m not nervous about it anymore.”

After her first winter break in the U.S., Clarissa re-entered the school year with another AP English class, AP American Language and Composition. According to CCHS English department teacher Ian Altman, just like the previous semester, she took the English class by storm.

“Her English is very good (and) I (find) her to be an excellent writer. (She’s) said that she especially appreciates learning about the history of English, which is something that I do early in the AP Language semester, so I (took the class) through true old English, which most people can’t even pronounce or

understand even a single word, (but she can),” Altman said. “She comes from a different kind of school in Italy so she has studied Latin and Ancient Greek, and I am familiar with those things, so we have a kind of intellectual connection.”

Clarissa’s praise-worthy work ethic has also been acknowledged by CCHS science department teacher Matthew Regester, as he found her academic ability in his fall term AP Chemistry class impressive.

“There’s always apprehension when someone jumps into AP Chemistry late (because) you don’t really know what level of chemistry they have (attained, but she was) amazing,” Regester said. “She came in with a lot of chemistry knowledge and (she was) one of the most diligent people in my class, if not the most.

(She was) always on top of it, so what she’s been able to do is incredible.”

With graduation on the horizon, and her year in the U.S. beginning to come to a close, Clarissa can’t help but reflect on her time in Athens and the relationships she’s formed.

“It’s still hard to imagine my graduation even though it’s only (in a couple) months. I (will) be proud of all my achievements and proud of all the good friendships and relationships with people that I made, (and I will) hopefully see myself as a better and

grown person,” Clarissa said. “(But) I won’t be ready to leave. I would have learned so many things, culturally and (emotionally) speaking, that I could not be happier and prouder of my place in the world.”

Clarissa has enjoyed her experience with the American high school education system for both its social and educational benefits, and is hoping to come to the U.S. for her collegiate education after going back to school in Italy for her final year at Liceo Classico M.T Cicerone High School.

“(Originally), I wasn’t sure about (staying), but I think that I (quickly) got used to American life,” Clarissa said. “I really like the way that people are (here and) that you can just go outside (and) live your life. I think I’m definitely made for this type of (lifestyle).”

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-- TYUS DEKLE,
CCHS junior

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Top left: CURIOSITY: Clarke Central High School senior and Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis (left) and CCHS junior Tyus Dekle (right) stand in Dekle’s family’s kitchen on Dec. 7, 2022. While in the United States, Clarissa has been able to immerse herself in the life of an American teenager, which is one of the things that she was curious about when first applying to become a foreign exchange student. “I was super excited to see how teenagers here live their life, outside school, in school, because one thing that I noticed (in Italy) is that probably half of the life of a teenager happened in the school,” Clarissa said. Photo by Aza Khan

Right: LONG FLIGHT: Clarke Central High School senior and Italian foreign exchange student Clarissa De Santis points to her home country on a globe in Room 231. Clarissa came to Athens on Aug. 19, 2022 after flying on a 14-hour flight. “I stayed in the same seat for around 14 hours so it was a long flight,” Clarissa said. “I landed in Atlanta, and then around two hours later, I was (picked) up from the airport (by) my counselor, which is like the person who check you every month from the exchange program and she (took me to Athens).” Photo by Lucas Donnelly

