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## U.S. Department of State's Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study International Students Celebrate 11th Successful Exchange Year on Capitol Hill

During the 2014-2015 school year, American families from 570 communities and over 700 schools across the U.S. hosted 857 Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (KL-YES) students from more than 40 countries. The KL-YES program offers merit-based awards, funded by the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), that provide each YES student with a full cultural immersion experience through living with a host family across 48 states, attending a U.S. high school, and helping students develop the skills necessary to be a global leader.

At the Capitol Hill Reception on June 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Senator Lugar (Ret.), co-founder of the YES program, spoke to over 230 YES students and special guests, including State Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary, Mara Tekach. Senator Lugar remarked what a significant impact studying abroad at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar had on his outlook of people from other countries and cultures. While meeting world leaders during his long career in the U.S. Senate, he noted that a very high percentage studied abroad, making these leaders highly capable of explaining to their fellow citizens why diplomacy and international cooperation are important.

These experiences helped Sen. Lugar and late Senator Edward Kennedy realize their desire and create an educational exchange program like KL-YES. Senator Lugar recognizes that these exchanges benefit the individual, but he emphasizes that they also help expand ties between nations, improve international commerce, and encourage cooperative solutions to global problems. This is an ambitious agenda to associate with student exchange programs, but Senator Lugar stresses that one should not underestimate the power of the cooperative endeavor inherent in these programs.

One of the three Capitol Hill Reception student speakers, Esther Bila, remarked on the difficulties she faced adjusting to life in her host community when her school in Nigeria closed down in December when it was attacked by Boko Haram. She sought advice from her guidance counselor, who encouraged her to get involved in extracurricular activities. Esther took his advice and readily joined a variety of extracurricular activities, from the track team to the Concert Choir. Esther went on to build a rocket for a Rocketry Challenge with her science club and together they won the State Championship for their work. Esther is a perfect example of KL-YES students' ability to flourish and accomplish so much more than they could ever imagine in the face of obstacles.

On June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the State Department welcomed an additional 500 KL-YES students for a year-end celebration where Assistant Secretary of Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs Evan Ryan facilitated a dialogue between KL-YES students and special guests including White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough, Special Representative to Muslim Communities Shaarik Zafar, and American actor, producer, and civil servant Kal Penn.



By participating in the YES program, each YES scholar is at the forefront of citizen diplomacy, serving as a youth ambassador for his or her respective country. Each YES student promotes mutual understanding by building lasting relationships with host families and host schools and through community engagement in volunteer service and leadership training. This year's graduating class of YES students contributed over 50,000 volunteer service hours in their U.S. host communities. Since the beginning of the YES program, more than 8,600 alumni have participated and together they have completed more than 420,000 hours of community service while living in the America.

For more information about hosting a YES international exchange student in your community, please visit [www.yesprograms.org/host](http://www.yesprograms.org/host).

