'There is still so much that connects people'

A Homestay Program spotlight with Makenna Sumner – Part 1

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Neepawa Banner & Press





PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MAKENNA SUMNER

Pictured left: Makenna Sumner (middle) and Japanese exchange student Kokona (left) who visited in 2025. Pictured right: Exchange student Haruka horseback riding for the first time, with Makenna Sumner as her dutiful mentor. This was just one of Haruka's experiences at the Sumner family farm during her 2024 visit.

During the past three years, area local Makenna Sumner has undertaken brand new experiences, strengthened her appreciation for another culture, forged lasting friendships, and so much more. Now, she wishes to highlight the exchange program that facilitated it all. The York-Benimaru 4-H Manitoba Homestay Program.

Held in partnership between the York-Benimaru Foundation, Manitoba Agriculture, and Manitoba 4-H Council since 1987, Makenna explained that it is "designed to promote global understanding and give young people the opportunity to experience another culture firsthand."

Delving further, Makenna explained that there are two different ways to engage with the program. First, as a host for Japanese exchange students– an opportunity available to any Manitoba family every August.

"Families interested in hosting do not have to have any school aged family members at all, or even be active 4-H members to apply," Makenna highlighted. "Many families with young children host every year, and the Japanese students always enjoy spending time with all members of their host family."

Second, as a Manitoba exchange student to Japan. This particular opportunity is accessible to any Manitoba 4-H member aged 16 to 18 who has first participated as a host for at least two weeks.

Easy to connect

As a member of the Neepawa Belles, Beaux, and Builders 4-H Club, Makenna has participated in both facets of the program. This week, the Neepawa Banner & Press will focus on her experience as a host.

"I had the chance to meet and participate in fun activities with Japanese students hosted by other families in my 4-H Club," Makenna recalled. "Each year, the Japanese students were so kind, friendly, and eager to understand more about Manitoba. Even through brief interactions, it was so easy to connect with them, inspiring me to learn more about the Homestay program and Japanese culture."

Applying through the Manitoba 4-H website, the Sumner family acted as hosts for two terms– first in 2024, and again in 2025.

"[The Japanese exchange students] go through a competitive application process and work very hard for the opportunity to stay with a family in Manitoba. Many of the students have interest in improving their English skills, wish to study or work in North America in the future, or hope to build their global perspective by experiencing local lifestyles, culture, and agricultural practices," Makenna explained. "When acting as a host, our main role is to welcome the Japanese students into our home and make them feel like a part of our family during their stay"

A key part of being a good host, Makenna noted, is communication.

"Because English is not their first language and they are in an unfamiliar country, an important part of hosting is to find ways to effectively communicate and to be supportive," said Makenna.

Small moments, big impact

As a farming family, the Sumners had a particular interest in sharing that aspect of their life.

"We were excited to give the students a chance to experience life on our family farm and in our community since that environment isn't something many have experienced before," said Makenna. "We made an effort to show them the source of some of the products they use back home, canola or pork for example, because Japan is a major export destination of Canadian agriculture products!"

In addition to life on the farm, the Sumners also had a packed list of other activities and Manitoba destinations planned. Walks around Riverbend Park, movies at the Roxy Theatre, tubing, small town music festivals, and more.

"[Planning ahead] allowed us to stay organized, but often, it was the small everyday things that made the most impact on the student," Makenna enthused. "Such as seeing their face light up after trying poutine for the first time, or watching as they admired the vastness of a prairie night sky with bright stars and northern lights."

While the opportunity to showcase daily life in Manitoba was exciting, Makenna expressed that one of the most rewarding aspects of hosting was being able to learn from the exchange students as well.

"My family and I have ended up learning just as much from the student as we hoped to share with them. They would show us pamphlets and tell us about their schools, hobbies, culture, and beautiful scenery of their home," said Makenna. "Generously, they would share tastes and traditions of Japan, from snacks, cultural art, and a home-cooked Japanese meal."

Makenna added, "Overall, I learned that there is still so much that connects people, even when challenged by language barriers and cultural differences."

In her closing thoughts, Makenna told the Neepawa Banner & Press that her own experience with the Homestay Program inspires others to participate.

"The Manitoba 4-H Council is always looking for host families, so I would recommend anyone interested in getting the opportunity to be part of an exchange to consider this program," Makenna enthused. "In my experience, the activities we did with the students usually ended up as highlights of my summer. Because we wanted to show them different parts of Manitoba, my family was inspired to visit places and try things that I had never done before either. In that way, the program wasn't just an opportunity for the students to experience something new, but it also encouraged our own family to appreciate more of what we have close to home"

Note: A story on Makenna Sumner's experience as an exchange student to Japan through the Homestay Program will appear in a future edition of the Neepawa Banner & Press.



Pictured: Makenna Sumner (far right), and Japanese exchange student Kokona at the Winkler Harvest Festival, enjoying some live music in August of 2025.