

Local Rotary exchange student will now head to South America

By **REMO ZACCAGNA**, Herald-Tribune staff

If she didn't before, Karly Hilgers is now a believer in the saying that when one door closes, another one opens.

Last month, a door closed on Hilgers in spectacular and tragic fashion.

The 17-year-old was in Japan as a Rotary Youth Exchange student in Koriyama, 60 kilometres from Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant that was damaged in a massive 9.0 magnitude earthquake that struck the northeastern part of the country.

Thanks in part to heroism displayed by her host father, who drove hours through back roads to get her to Tokyo's airport, Hilgers was able to safely make it back to Grande Prairie on March 16.

But no sooner did she arrive than another proverbial door opened.

Rotarians in Brazil made an offer to accept any student who was forced to leave Japan after the triple tragedy of earthquake, tsunami, and possible nuclear calamity.

And so the decision was easy for Hilgers to finish her term in the southeastern Brazilian city of Belo Horizonte.

"I'm so excited. I feel like I had to kind of prepare myself to be travelling for the next year," she said. "I'm buying lots of shorts and other stuff. Getting ready to pack again."

It was a decision that came easy for her, after spending a few weeks re-adjusting to home life.



"I was just kind of looking at getting a job, and I didn't think I could catch up on my Grade 12 homework that fast," she said. "I was just hanging out with my friends the past couple of weeks."

However, Japan has never been far from her thoughts, and she said she would continue to cherish her experience there even though she will soon be off on a new adventure.

"I'm still adjusting slowly and kind of thinking Japanese words now and then," she said. "I'm following the news a bit...and I've been phoning all of my host families every now and then."

The Sunrise Rotary Club is sponsoring Hilgers' trip to Brazil, which is expected to end in August.

"Through the work of Rotary International and the Youth Exchange Program, there was a discussion that had taken place and it was agreed that if there were some youth that are interested in going to Brazil, then Brazil very warmly and openly would accept them to finish their term as an exchange student," said club president Tracey Vavrek.

Karen Munjak, president of the Rotary Club of Grande Prairie, said the Brazilians' offer would go a long way to helping Hilgers and others in similar circumstances overcome the abrupt end to their exchange.

"When those students had their exchange there cut short because of the tragedy in Japan, it was really hard on them. It's so disappointing and to have Brazil step up and say 'hey, we'll take any kids that got sent back,'" she said.

"It made me really happy to see that."

So happy, in fact, that she decided to reciprocate and extend the same offer to Brazilian students forced to leave Japan.

And so, once visa issues are resolved, a student named Luisa is scheduled to arrive in Grande Prairie in May.

Vavrek said that's what Rotary is all about.

"When you look at the synergies of everybody coming together to find an opportunity to give a real positive spin for these youths ... just shows what Rotarians are really about who go above and beyond to help others in our community and on an international level," she said.

As for Hilgers, she has already sought the advice of her older sister, Katherine, who spent a year in Brazil as a Rotary exchange student.

"I'm trying to learn Portuguese, and I asked about the culture and staying safe," she said.

And she said she would benefit from her nearly eight-month experience in Japan.

"I got some experience with living with a different family, and being in a completely new school, with a completely new language. I think that will help me a lot," she said.

"I'm expecting to continue everything that I was doing in Japan, my growing as a person, and meet a new host family, new friends, and learn a new culture. I'm really excited for it."

Belo Horizonte (Beautiful Horizon) is the capital of and largest city in the state of Minas Gerais in the southeastern region of Brazil. It is the third-largest metropolitan area in the country.

Belo Horizonte (or "Beagá" or "Belô" as it is also familiarly known from the sound of its initials "BH" in Portuguese) has a population of more than 2.4 million, and almost 5.4 million in the metropolitan area.