

LCPCS Welcomes Foreign Exchange Student from Azerbaijan



Fidan (Alex) Akifzada poses recently while touring Akaka Falls.

Eighteen-year-old Fidan (Alex) Akifzada is a long way from home, but settling happily into Laupāhoehoe and the LCPCS community. Alex comes from Azerbaijan, a country at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia bordered by Russia, Armenia, Iran and the Caspian Sea. She is here via the American Councils for International Education, which is a division of the US State Department. After an exhaustive (and exhausting) selection process based on English language ability, academic performance, interviews and recommendations, about one in 50 applicants for the program are selected. Students live with an American host family and attend a full year of high school in the States.

Alex started the schoolyear at Kealakehe in Kona, and transferred to LCPCS in October upon joining her permanent host family in Laupāhoehoe. Coming to LCPCS was a welcome change after the bustle at Kealakehe. At LCPCS, she says, she found the other students much more welcoming, and settled in quickly. One of her favorite things about LCPCS, she says, is that the teachers are not strict or scary. "For example," she said recently, "our PE teacher comes up when he senses that we are sad, [it's] so nice, so sweet. Our teachers [in Azerbaijan] don't care... you learn their subject, if you don't, you go."

School is very different in Azerbaijan, where classes can last until eight or ten at night, and are sometimes followed with several hours of homework! When Alex arrived at the home of her local host family, she said that she had not watched a movie in more than three years. There just isn't time in the day, after the school-

work. And to think that when asked what she was most afraid of before coming to the States, Alex responded that it was school! "School scared me because I can't speak perfectly. I think it's going to be so hard for reading and writing, that they're going to give me bad grades." But she is doing very well in her classes, and has no more to fear on that front.

Alex and other students in her exchange program, all from former Soviet countries, were prepped hard for the adjustments they would need to make to American life, so there weren't as many surprises as you might think. In Azerbaijan, a university education is free, so it was interesting for her to learn that college here can cost so much. She also admires the freedoms that women enjoy here. Azerbaijan is a largely Muslim country with a secular government, and women do not generally wear hijab or other covering. They can be doctors or lawyers, but are not welcome in the business community, and are normally expected to manage all housework and childcare in addition to whatever jobs they have. In Laupāhoehoe, she



Left: Azerbaijan is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. Right: Alex holds a "host goat." A city girl, she has had to make some adjustments to Laupāhoehoe's rural lifestyle!

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was surprised to see her host father cook meals. She also said it's weird that everyone pumps their own gas!

What will she miss most when she returns to Azerbaijan? Her host family and their animals, her friends and Hawai'i. "[You] have an aloha spirit, really, [you] have. I feel home here, that's so weird, I don't feel somewhere else, I feel home here," she said the other day.

For information on hosting a foreign exchange student, contact Barbara Bancel, at the International Hospitality Center in Honolulu, (808) 521-3554 or ihc@priory.net, or check out their website: www.ihchawaii.org.

Director's Corner



Aloha Seaside Community!

We are well into the second half of the school year and entering the stretch run. There are a number of events on the horizon that should make it onto your calendars.

The Tsunami Memorial is April 1st. Events start at 8:30 am on the elementary playground, and parents and community members are invited. Contact the school for more info.

Our Athletics Department will be hosting a fundraiser titled E Mai A Huaka'i Ma Hāmākua on April 11th. Tickets are available through Eventbrite (just Google the event name and Google will take you to Eventbrite), and more information will be available on the website soon.

And, the Music Festival is April 25th. Mark your calendars, and more information will be posted as the event grows nearer. I hope to see you all at these wonderful events.

Seasider Spotlight

Dharma Shay is a many-faceted man. He is not only LCPCS's physical education teacher this year, he also owns a gym in Hilo, and runs an online business. He has lived in four or five countries, and speaks both Chinese and Japanese. He says his parents were "yogi-intellectuals," and opted to leave California for the healthier lifestyle in Hawai'i when he was seven. So he essentially grew up here, attending the Waters of Life Charter School in Puna. Then, finding himself interested in the global community, he earned a Bachelor's Degree in Health Administration in Korea, a Master's Degree in Sports and Health Science in Vietnam, and a second Bachelor's Degree in psychology in California. "I love projects," he said recently, "and I really believe that youth are where our focus needs to be." His Hilo gym works with athletes at both the high school and college levels, and he also coaches professional athletes who are visiting the Islands and need a place to work out. He is at LCPCS to build a program; he says that the students here weren't used to challenging and structured PE classes, but that they are getting the hang of it. Indeed, feedback on his teaching is highly positive, from both students and fellow staff. We hope Coach Dharma will stick around for awhile!



Mr. Shay with Filipe Pena, holder of multiple Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu world championships, in Bangkok, Thailand in 2019.