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Meet Jérémy: French exchange student receives warm welcome in Bowman while capturing hearts

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Jérémy Dahan, a native of southwest France, came to Bowman in late August. His host parents, Bryce Martin, editor of The Pioneer, and Nate Lee, publisher of The Pioneer and The Finder, welcomed him with open arms, since taking several trips to show the exchange student what the region is all about including a stop at Theodore Roosevelt National Park in Medora.

By BRYCE MARTIN

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While visiting France is the dream of so many Americans, Dahan felt the contrary, brimming with the desire to visit one of his country's closest allies across the Atlantic.

So he began on a lengthy endeavor to participate in his country's foreign exchange program to study overseas. It wasn't until two Bowman residents chose him from a long list of candidates that his dream would finally become a reality. **2** Premium articles left

Those residents were Nate Lee and myself.

He arrived, eyes reddened from fatigue and smelling of sweat from running around airports all day, Aug. 25, flying from Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, to Newark, Denver, then his destination in Dickinson.

"I'm so tired" were pretty much Dahan's first words as he stood in the airport, tired yet restless from the long flights. His plane arrived ahead of schedule, though Nate and I were already behind because we forgot his welcome poster at home.

The hour-long drive back to Bowman was filled with simple exchanges and conversation, but mostly yawns.

To cram as many trips into the short time that the weekend weather would be pleasant, he wasn't afforded too much time for rest. Off to Theodore Roosevelt National Park and Medora the next day, Rapid City and the Black Hills after that, and eventually to Montana and Yellowstone National Park.



(<http://www.bowmanextra.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/CMI-sizes.jpg>)

Dahan, a junior at Bowman County High School, joined the junior varsity football team as kicker and safety.

He's been here for just over a month but has already seen a great deal of the region.

So far, he says, he loves it.

"It's like a dream," he said, sitting in a cozy spot in our living room, his head slightly tilted, smile beaming. "Being in North Dakota is more fun (than France)."

He's been overwhelmed with the warmhearted welcomes he has received and the indelible amiability of Bowman County's community, which is a far cry from the typically aloof, arrogant people he said he is used to in France. "But maybe it's just this way in Bowman County?" he wondered aloud.

Nate and I smirked at one another. "Most likely," we answered in unison, adding a slight chuckle.

Born April 20, 2000, Dahan has since lived a traditional French life, filled with family, friends and good, rich French food. He has grown up in a small village in southwest France, close to Spain, that is not too unlike Bowman. Though the neighboring city, only less than 10 miles away, is Tarbes, a city of nearly 80,000 people. That's where he attends school.

Rugby, a popular sport in much of Europe and especially in his region, dominated his interests growing up. He played on a team in his youth, but experienced some injuries. But when he heard he was able to play high school football in Bowman, he jumped at the chance.

A banker by trade, his father, Rémy, was cautious to allow Dahan to play football. His mother, Karine, a nurse, speaks very limited English and wasn't able to contact us prior to his arrival though she ultimately said she was proud her son — the youngest of three children — and that he was able to play and quickly form friendships.

Dahan's future ambitions are vague at this point, still looking forward to his experiences in the United States, but he indicated that he would like to attend college, perhaps here.

Meanwhile, his primary goal in America is to improve his English skills, perhaps subduing his thick yet still coherent French accent. (He admitted, it has helped him so far that I can speak French.)

"I thought everyone would laugh at my accent," he professed. Instead, the girls thought it was charming so he coyly said he's OK with it.

He also wanted to discover a new culture and along the way has discovered that many European stereotypes of Americans are untrue, such as everyone being grossly overweight and only eating strict diets of fast food.

What he has seen on film of America sometimes casts a false light on what it's actually like to live, work and play in the United States. Albeit certain films would be more accurate than others, but one that stuck out in his mind was the popular musical film about high school youths, "High School Musical."

It was quite a sight for Dahan to see that, indeed, all the student athletes wear their jerseys, tucked into blue jeans during school and that they use lockers.

"It's just like the movies," he said. Though all the male students don't resemble Zac Efron.

What struck him as being most different from his reality was school pride in Bowman County. France does not take pride in their schools, he explained, as they are merely considered a place for learning, with not much fun, inspired conversation or kinship with teachers.

But because Dahan decided to become an exchange student, his host organization in France requires him to repeat the school year, his junior year, when he returns home next summer. That means he won't graduate with his close friends.

"It is worth it," he said.

Being in the States during such a heated presidential election has also been somewhat of an eye-opening experience for Dahan. He calls what he has seen of the debates and the back-and-forth between the candidates a "show." Nate and I have attempted to explain the difference between this year's election and those in previous years, but the explanation doesn't suffice. But we'll avoid discussing any political viewpoints in print.

Even though Dahan, who one of his classmate's said was the most popular student in school, has had an excellent time adjusting to American daily life, he still misses a few things back home, specifically the traditional, sometimes stinky, French cheeses.

His favorite types of cheese, made with unpasteurized milk, are actually illegal in this country, so he has to do with American cheese, which he said lacks flavor. Though after nearly a month of searching, we were finally able to locate one wheel of his favorite cheese, Camembert. We presented it to him during his welcoming surprise party two weeks ago at our home and he exploded with joy, despite it being Americanized and pasteurized. Never have we seen anybody so excited about cheese. He immediately ran around and nearly forced his party guests to join him in devouring the savory cheese. It was gone within minutes.

Dahan said as host parents Nate and I are cool, nice, fun and generous — and not just because of the cheese. "You both are very popular and do a lot for the community ... and seem to know everyone," he told us. Soon enough, he will, too.

He said he is looking forward to more trips around the country before he departs in early June, along with firing a gun for the first time — law does not protect private ownership of firearms in France — and surviving a North Dakota winter, he admitted with a laugh. Meanwhile, we'll be searching for some "sufficient" French cheeses over the next nine months.

If you are interested in hosting an exchange student, visit ASSE online at www.asse.com for a complete list of international student exchange programs or contact Amanda Seymour, ASSE's regional representative located in New England, at (970) 361-4524 or email sconsinsgirl@aol.com.

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