

Eastside student accepted to international program in Japan

Fifteen-year-old Maya Oli was born and raised in Gainesville, and her roots here are deep. But in just a week she'll be leaving her Gainesville life behind to become a student at a Japanese high school.

Oli has been accepted into the United World Colleges (UWC) program, which has a stated purpose of bringing together students from different backgrounds and “making education a force to unite people, nations and cultures for peace and a sustainable future.” There are currently UWC schools in 17 nations across the globe.

Oli, who was a student in Eastside High Schools International Baccalaureate (IB) program for her freshman year, will spend the next three years at the International School of Asia in Karuisawa, Japan (ISAK) about 70 minutes by train from Tokyo. It's a boarding school serving about 150 students from more than 50 countries. Oli will actually earn her high school diploma from ISAK.



Moving thousands of miles away from her hometown will be a huge change, she acknowledges.

“I've always lived in Gainesville and everything that I know is in Gainesville, so it will be kind of scary to go somewhere else,” she said. “But I thought it was worth it because it's an amazing opportunity.”

The school is very selective, and Oli had to submit an application, essays and responses to written questions and undergo an interview process. The school is based on the IB program, which means rigorous academics and an emphasis on school and community service. There will also be courses in such topics as ‘mindful self-discipline’ and ‘design innovation’—and of course, the Japanese language.

Leadership is a critical element of the UWC-ISAK program. According to the school's website, the mission is to help students become ‘change-makers.’ That's a goal Oli embraces for herself.

“I hope I will learn to see things from both sides, get a greater knowledge of the world and learn about other people, different cultures and different places,” she said. “If you understand people, there will be more peace.”

Social media and other forms of technology will help her stay connected to her friends and family in Gainesville. In fact, she plans to start a blog so that she can share her experiences with people at home and in other parts of the world.

Oli's mother Monika says she has mixed emotions about her daughter's upcoming move, but she also strongly encouraged Maya's efforts to take advantage of what she calls a ‘new adventure.’

“It will be life-changing,” she said. “She'll be a different person coming back, but I think in a good way. It will bring out more of who she is.”

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