

From Florence to Faribault County

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The city of Florence, Italy, was home to many influential figures throughout history—in the 13th century, Dante Alighieri wrote the 'Divine Comedy,' and during the 16th century, Leonardo da Vinci developed his talent for painting while Michelangelo sculpted the iconic David statue.

Florentine student Emma Schena, 17, arrived in Faribault County a few months ago, just in time to begin her senior year at United South Central High School in Wells.

Though she has not created any world-renowned masterpieces—yet—she is involved in quite a few activities that allow her talents to shine.

Of all her talents, Schena's favorite activity is swimming. She has practiced the sport since she was four-years-old and has been on a swim team in Florence ever since.

Unfortunately, aquatics is not offered at USC, but before she signed up for the exchange program, she was well aware that she would have to take a break from swimming for a while.

"I knew that it was possible that I wouldn't be able to [swim] here, so I was prepared for that," she says. "It's not easy because I like swimming, but I'm enjoying what I'm doing now."

A pool may not be readily available, but she has taken part in some of the sports that USC does offer. This winter

she looks forward to playing on the Rebel basketball team.

"I've only practiced during open gym, but so far it is fun," she says.

She also practiced with the tennis team this fall, but was not able to compete in the actual matches because she arrived in Wells after school had already started.

"I couldn't find a family right away," Schena explains. "So I didn't get here until the 8th of September."

Her host parents, John and Cindy Herman, have hosted five exchange students in the past but they were not planning to host another student this year.

"Our youngest son is a senior so we decided not to host one this year," Cindy says. "[The American Field Service] started sending us emails in June, but we didn't respond and didn't respond. Then the time came when Emma needed a place to live, and at that point, we just couldn't resist."

Although her arrival was unanticipated, Schena is quite happy with her placement.

"I'm glad that I'm in this part of America because it's not the same as it is in Italy," she says.

One of her primary goals in participating in the AFS program was to study in an unfamiliar country. Norway was her first choice and the United States was her second.

"The U.S. was only second because I thought it would be the same as Italy," she explains. "A lot of countries are similar because of

globalization so I wanted to go to somewhere that was less familiar. But this has been different because it isn't at all what I've expected."

In Florence, Shena lives in the city center with her mother, father and older brother, Lorenzo. Therefore, she is still getting used to a small-town lifestyle. But she has been very open to trying all that southern Minnesota has to offer including the recent snowfall, which has definitely piqued her interest.

"I am not used to it," she says. "We don't really have snow in Florence. I've only really seen it when I've gone skiing in the Alps."

In addition to acclimating to a cold, snowy climate, she also had to get used to a completely different school system.

"I go to an international school in Italy and the days are usually only six hours and we have school on Saturday," Schena explains. "It's more difficult for me than for other students in my class because I am not used to studying in English."

Her class load consists of math, American history, English, life fitness, life skills and chemistry. Her favorite courses this quarter are life fitness and math.

"I am very lucky because the math teacher is letting me do my math program from Italy," Schena says. "Since I can do my math here, I will start my fifth year of high school with the rest of my class when I get back."

Students in Italy graduate

when they are 19 years old. They start school with two years of preschool and one year of kindergarten and then they must complete five years of elementary school, three years of middle school and five more years of high school.

Fortunately, the year that Schena spends in the United States will count toward her high school credits in Italy, allowing her to graduate on time. So now, she is still able to experience what it is like to be a high school student in America.

Of all the special events and traditions celebrated in high schools across the country, Schena is most excited to go to prom.

"The first thing that people in Italy think about in American high schools is prom," Schena laughs. "It's in films and media—I'm looking forward to it."

Attending an American high school is only a small piece of a much larger adventure for this 17 year old. She hopes that when she returns to Italy next June, she can bring home new knowledge that will change her outlook on life.

"[I want] to be very fluent with the language and keep contact with my American family and friends," she says. "I just want to go home with a lot of memories. This is the program I chose so I could experience another part of the world and it would change my life."