Everyone remembers their high school prom; it’s one of the most traditional high school experiences. For me, however, it was anything but normal. Yes, I had the obligatory fancy dress, corsage, and high heeled shoes, but standing beside me while taking prom pictures was my date, tugging uncomfortably at his bow tie and fixing his gelled hair. An indigenous Costa Rican student who spoke almost no English, Billie had never before seen a tuxedo much less put one on, and was clueless about the odd cultural phenomenon of “prom.” As fifteen digital cameras went off simultaneously and our faces grew stiff from parents’ demands for constant smiles, I considered how alien and yet intriguing this American rite-of-passage must have seemed to Billie and my best friend’s date, Cristo. However, although I didn’t have the stereotypical date, this prom was exactly as I had planned and I couldn’t have been happier.

Though most girls start planning for prom six months before the event, my prom story began six years ago. During the summer before 6th grade, I went on the “adventure of a lifetime”—an adventure that turned into a passion that will last my whole life. My former Spanish teacher lived on the Borucan reservation in Costa Rica while in the Peace Corps in the 1990s, and 15 years later brought me and ten other middle school students to her adopted community for volunteer work, cultural exchange, and Spanish immersion. These two weeks led to three years of community service trips to Boruca, during which I worked around the village, learned about the art and culture embedded in the Borucan way of life, was stung by a scorpion, and, more significantly, developed lasting relationships with several families and individuals. In Boruca, I had discovered a community where I felt welcomed unconditionally, worked hard, and had fun in the process. While learning to weave on a traditional back-strap loom or carving intricate designs into hand-made drums with an electric carving tool - probably illegal in the United States for obvious safety reasons - I discovered a way of life the complete opposite of my own, yet one that I grew to love.

Dreaming of ways to give back to the community that had provided us so much, in 2006 my best friend and I co-founded a student exchange program through our middle school to bring Borucan students to the U.S. After one failed attempt at obtaining visas, I wrote letters to Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and met with a representative from her office. With a letter of recommendation from the Congresswoman in hand, and one from the principal of our school, the SEP committee (Student Exchange Program) acquired visas for four 12-15 year old Borucan students and their teacher. Money became the next obstacle, and as president of the SEP committee I organized countless bake-sales, performed in a benefit concert, and secured a matching donation from the school’s Parents’ Association, finally reaching our $9,000 goal. After months of planning, the first group of students arrived in the U.S., but all too soon we were sending them back to Costa Rica. It was only then that I allowed myself to feel a sense accomplishment and pride. These were students who previously knew nothing of the world outside their small village; they had never ridden an airplane, been on a rollercoaster, or felt the cold touch of snow on their skins. All of our hard work had paid off and I had been an integral part in making these experiences possible.

The legacy of the student exchange program continues at my middle school to this day and has so far brought four groups of Costa Rican students to the United States. Four years ago, however, I could have only dreamed that the fanciful idea of two 13-year-olds would turn into such a successful project. My involvement with the Borucan community persists years after my graduation from middle school, as I returned to Boruca for a month last year, and I continue to assist the SEP committee in organizing student exchanges. I have even expanded the experience to include visits to my high school where they shared aspects of their culture with the larger community of Bentley Upper School, including their language and traditional mask painting techniques.

This last year’s trip happened to coincide with our junior prom, and my best friend and I thought it would be the perfect culmination of the students’ U.S. immersion to experience something as innately American as the high school prom. A week before the dance, when sitting around the dining room table, my Spanish proficiency was helpful in explaining the tradition. Using Borucan cultural practices as analogies, and laughing about upcoming tuxedo fittings, our excitement about the event was finally conveyed to Cristo and Billie. Even so, we all had some reservations about the evening and how the Borucans would manage in this unfamiliar situation. My trepidation about pulling our dates out of their comfort zones, however, proved to be unfounded. While sitting in the packed limousine after a night of dancing at the prom and eating multiple bowls of ice cream from the sundae bar, Billie and his contagious smile proved that he enjoyed embracing the American culture just as I had embraced his.

“It was one of my favorite experiences of the trip,” he later told me, though I had the sneaking suspicion that perhaps he would have enjoyed it even more without the scratchy bowtie.