



The Dispatch

Spring 2025

We're Neighbors Abroad, and this is your passport to what's happening with Palo Alto's Sister, Sibling, and Friendship Cities.

Scroll down for stories that span the globe — or [click here](#) for the best view.

Host a Short-Term Exchange Student / Send Your Student to Mexico or France!

Since the earliest days of Neighbors Abroad—going back more than 60 years—teen exchange programs have been at the core of our mandate. These exchanges can be life-changing experiences for the participating students and their host families. In fact, our own president, Sarah Burgess, was an exchange student to Oaxaca, our Sister City in Mexico, in the 1970s!



We are lining up our programs for summer 2025 and we are seeking high school students to serve as "young ambassadors" in our Oaxaca, Mexico program, as well as families in or near Palo Alto to host a teen boy from Albi, France. These hosting/travel opportunities are ideal for busy families because they are somewhat flexible in terms of dates and duration.

Our Oaxaca program is reciprocal, meaning that the participating host "brothers and sisters" will spend time with each other's families over the summer.

For Albi, we are seeking a family to host a 15-year-old boy for 2-4 weeks in July or August. The Albi exchange is not directly reciprocal, but the local hosting family would have the opportunity to send their own teen on a similar homestay in Albi during Summer 2026.

These homestays are at no cost to the participating students (except for airfare and some spending money).

If you've ever thought about opening your home and heart to what could possibly be a life-long connection, please contact: mschreiber@neighborsabroad.org

[Linköping, Sweden](#)

Bifrost Sustainability Summit Brings Our Linköping Friends Back to Palo Alto

We were delighted to host a delegation from Palo Alto's Swedish Sister City, Linköping, in early March. The group,



headed by Mayor Mikael Sanfridson, was in town for the annual [Bifrost Sustainability Summit](#) presented by the Nordic Innovation House.

The group had a productive meeting at Palo Alto City Hall with Mayor Ed Lauing; enjoyed a welcome reception at the home of NA vice president Ed Fike; and took part in the Sustainable Cities Bilateral conference at the Palo Alto Art Center. Ed even engaged in some "pickleball diplomacy," introducing delegate Malin Ljung to the sport he is so passionate about.

The delegates also paid a visit to the Stanford University campus, including the Cantor Arts Center and the

university's Central Energy Facility. Palo Alto Councilmember Pat Burt then led the group on an engaging afternoon tour of downtown Palo Alto, with a stop, of course, at the Hewlett-Packard garage. The visit ended with a festive dinner at Neighbors Abroad's favorite hot spot, Terun. In addition to Ed, Neighbors Abroad board members Claire Lauing, Wayne Thompson, Sarah Burgess, and Yudy Deng turned out to ensure a fun and productive visit.



[Tsuchiura, Japan](#)

Welcome to Exchange Students from Tsuchiura!

It was cheers and hugs all around when the ten exchange students from our Japanese Sister City of Tsuchiura arrived

in Palo Alto on March 15. They were greeted by their Palo Alto buddies and their families, many holding welcome signs. The middle school students participating in this year's program were eager to meet their Sister City counterparts, with whom they'd already been corresponding since December. "We had a busy week," says Tsuchiura VP Evelyn Shimakazi, who annually coordinates the exchange on the Palo Alto side. "The Tsuchiura students spent three days shadowing their Palo Alto buddies at Greene, JLS or Fletcher Middle School to experience middle student life in Palo Alto. They got a glimpse of Palo Alto City Council proceedings and had a meeting with Palo Alto Mayor Ed Lauing, as well as a visit to San Francisco, distinctly Silicon Valley sights like Google and Stanford, and an overnight in Yosemite."



The reciprocal middle school program has been running for 32 years, with many hundreds of students having participated from both cities. Click [here](#) to read some student blog posts about the trip, which offer a first-hand account of the typical cultural and educational experiences we offer to our participating students.



Families in the Palo Alto area typically host students from Tsuchiura in March. Then during the summer, the Palo Alto students stay with the family of the Tsuchiura student they hosted. In addition to the homestay portion of the trip, the students attend middle school in Tsuchiura, are hosted by Mayor Mariko Ando, and visit historical and cultural sites of interest in Tsuchiura and throughout Japan.

Congratulations to all the participating students and families. Thank you for opening your homes and your hearts!



Entrepreneurs and Alumni from
Twente University Meet in Palo
Alto to Talk Tech



[Enschede, The Netherlands](#)

Joe Laufer, Senior Advisor for Alumni Relations at Enschede's highly regarded University of Twente, was among a group of Dutch entrepreneurs and technical innovators who converged in Palo Alto in January. Alumni and start-up founders connected to the University of Twente and three other technical universities in the Netherlands (collectively known as 4TU) met here for several jam-packed days of networking and educational events.

"After 10 years of alumni engagement, Silicon Valley felt very much like home for a group of Twente/4TU startups," Laufer said in a LinkedIn post. The gathering in Silicon Valley included coaching sessions with senior-level alumni, as well as visits to Adobe and Applied Materials, among other companies. The group also had meetings at the Dutch Consulate in San Francisco, engaged with thought leaders at Stanford University, and enjoyed a number of other visits and events.

"With over 1,000 alumni in the greater SF Bay Area, the Enschede-Delft-Eindhoven-Wageningen regions are closer than ever to this global innovation hotspot," Laufer said.

Mike Verkouter, who manages a number of startup initiatives connected to the University of Twente, was a lead organizer of the 4TU event. Check out his [video about the gathering on his Instagram page](#).

These events were not sponsored by Neighbors Abroad, but we cheer the continued collaborations between our two cities' most innovative entrepreneurs.



[New Board Member!](#)

Claire Lauing Joins the Neighbors Abroad Board as Co-VP for Linköping

A warm welcome to new board member Claire Lauing!

In 2024, when Claire's husband Ed was vice mayor of Palo Alto, they participated in Neighbors Abroad's delegation to Oaxaca to mark the 60th anniversary of that Sister City relationship. The experience in Oaxaca inspired Claire to

become involved in supporting Neighbors Abroad and the timing was perfect for a new co-VP for our Swedish Sister City.

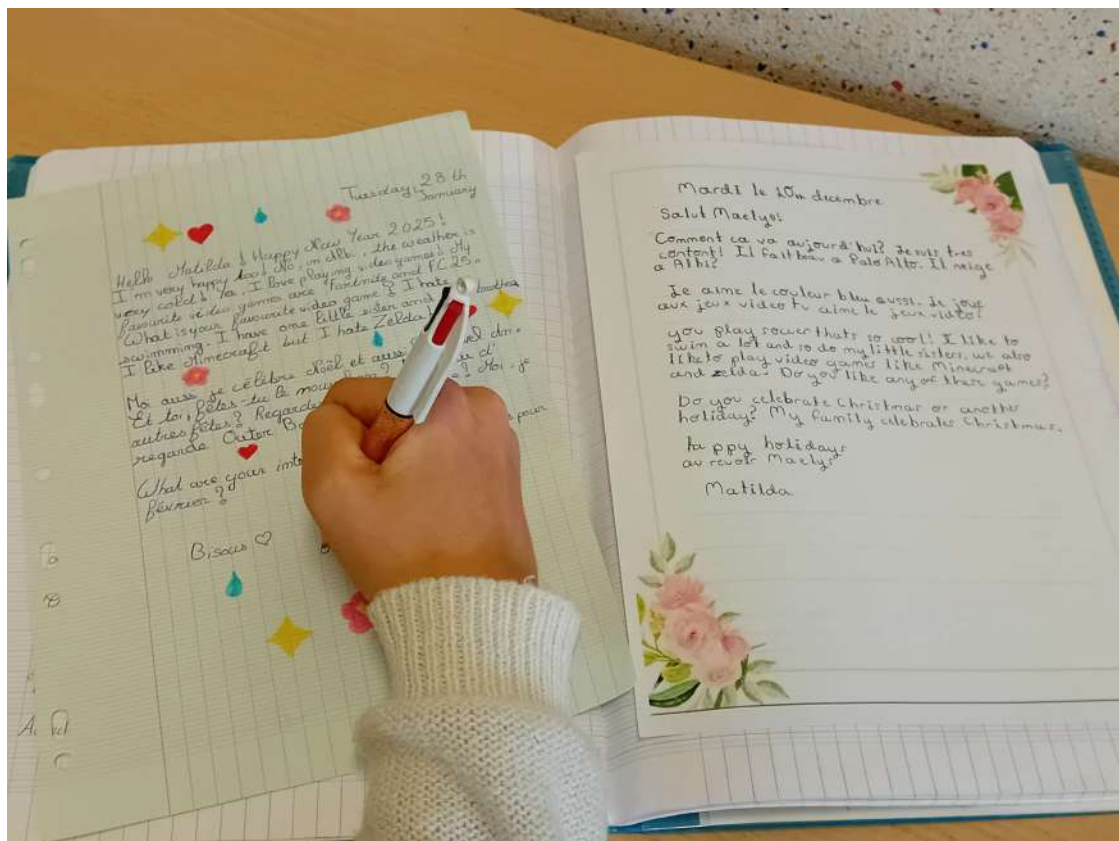
Born in a U.S. Army hospital on California's central coast, Claire was raised in Palo Alto from the age of three. Her parents were avid travelers and instilled in her a deep interest in the history and the cultures of the world, which she has continued to explore throughout her life.

Claire attended Palo Alto public schools and earned a BA in drama from Stanford University. She built a career as a writer/editor in book and magazine publishing (*San Francisco* magazine, *Runner's World*, and *Sunset Books*, where she was a cookbook editor), and later worked for 16 years in Development Communications at Stanford. She has also been an active community volunteer, supporting her children's schools and local organizations, and has served on the boards of Hillel at Stanford, the Friends of the Palo Alto Children's Theatre, and the Music Boosters at Palo Alto High School. Claire and Ed raised their family in Palo Alto. They are the proud parents of three and grandparents of two.

Bonjour, Pen Pals! JLS French Language Students Connect with Sister City Friends in Albi

Albi, France

Since the start of the 2024-25 school year, JLS Middle School French teacher Jacqui Kandell has been partnering with Laëtitia Fabre, an English teacher at Collège Bellevue in Albi, on a delightful pen pal project between their respective students. Neighbors Abroad's Albi team of Jennifer Kleckner and Monica Schreiber helped set up this and other classroom pen pal projects over the last several years.



One of the Albi students drafts a beautiful letter to her JLS Middle School pen pal.

The letter exchange allows the students to practice their language skills while learning a little about the day-to-day lives of their Sister City counterparts. To keep students from using Google Translate or other AI tools, the teachers insist on doing things the old-fashioned way: let's hear it for hand-written letters and the promotion of penmanship skills!

"This is the second letter exchange I've done with Albi students and it is so sweet to see the students engage in this project," says Jacqui, who has partnered with Neighbors Abroad on several other projects over the last few years, including the recent planting of a tree at JLS to mark the [30th anniversary of the Sister City relationship](#). "When students write their letters, they really care about their spelling and grammar. Also, they intuitively understand the connection between what they're learning in class and its practical application. My goal is always to find ways to take French out of the classroom, so what better way than this to use the French they're learning to make connections with students their age?"



Dispatch from Albi: Cynthia Mahood Levin of the Aurora Singers Reports on Her Recent Visit



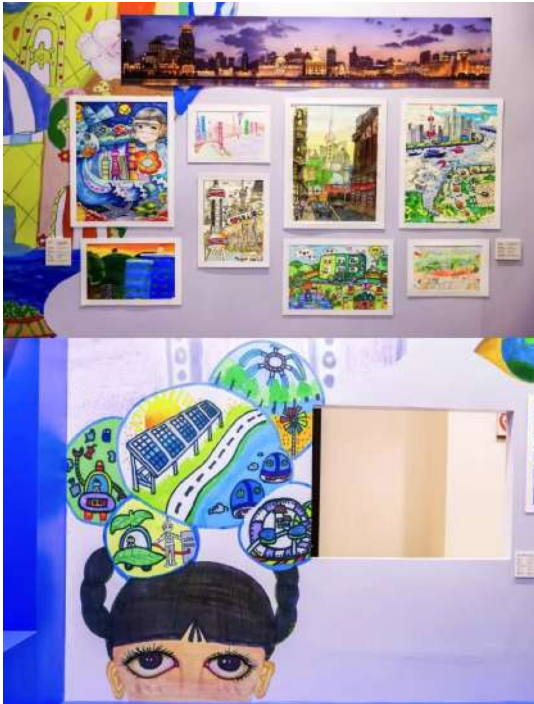
For decades, a high note of the Albi-Palo Alto Sister City relationship has been the deep friendship—and many collaborations—between Albi’s Chorale Assou Lezert and Palo Alto’s Aurora Singers. Joint projects have fallen off since 2019, but the ties between the *chanteurs* remain strong. We hope to be able to invite the Neighbors Abroad community to collaborative concerts in the near future!

We recently received the below dispatch from Aurora Singers’ Cynthia Mahood Levin, who visits her Assou Lezert friends in Albi multiple times a year. (Pictured here is Cynthia and her Albi chorale counterpart Cathy Bezio). Cynthia writes:

“I was very fortunate to be able to attend a performance by our magnificent Sister City choir, conducted by Nicolas Desroziers. Chorale Assou Lezert collaborated with a choir from Toulouse in the village of Saint-Juéry. The concert was so popular they could not fit everyone into the auditorium. The last time our Palo Alto choir, the Aurora Singers, did an

exchange with Assou Lezert was in 2019, when we hosted them in Palo Alto. I first met them in 2016 when they hosted us in Albi, and consider my French friends to be like a second family! My friend Cathy Bezio has graciously hosted me during many visits, and over time we have made progress teaching each other our respective languages. Albi has a beautiful choir community that spoils its Palo Alto visitors with locally sourced food, amazing French home cooking, and beautiful walks in the countryside. We never get tired of exploring Albi and the surrounding region, which is incredibly photogenic!"

Young Palo Alto Artists Showcase Their Work in Yangpu



Yangpu District, Shanghai, China

In late December, Yangpu District held its International Student Art Biennale, an exhibit of works by young artists from Yangpu and its Sister Cities. A number of Palo Alto's talented young artists were front and center in the show: Eva Zhao, Ian Zhao, and Vincent Wang (Ohlone Elementary and Castilleja Middle School, winners of the Gold Prize for their drawing, "Bridging East and West"); Elise Chang (Escondido Elementary), Emma Wang (JLS Middle School), and Ziqi Jin (Gunn High School).

Our Yangpu VP, Yudy Deng facilitated the participation of more than 20 works

from the Palo Alto students and President Sarah Burgess recorded a congratulatory video message that was shared with the exhibit organizers and city officials in Yangpu. We are thrilled that 10 of our students' pieces won awards while their art helped promote cross-cultural understanding and collaboration.

Themes for the exhibit were urban harmony, sustainability, and future cityscapes. According to a Yangpu news report, Wang Fang, Deputy Party Secretary of Yangpu Education Work and Director of Yangpu Education Bureau, "expressed her hope that the Biennale would serve as a platform for Chinese and foreign students to showcase their talents and exchange ideas, and become a vital window for sister schools and friendly exchange partners worldwide to experience the vibrant city of Shanghai and appreciate the unique charm of Yangpu."



"Bridging East and West" by Eva Zhao, Ian Zhao, and Vincent Wang

Narok, Kenya

"The Women are Earning an Income for the First Time in Their Lives": A Report From the Maasai Mara

When Narok, Kenya became Palo Alto's first Friendship City in 2024, we joined forces with Barb Mackraz, who has worked in Narok and the surrounding region for many years and now serves on Neighbors Abroad's board. We also partnered with Barb's Oliveseed Foundation and Oliveseed Kenya Trust on projects in the Maasai Mara, home to traditional Maasai communities living a pastoral way of life.

Barb recently sent a report from the Maasai Mara about the impactful initiatives at the Women's Work Center she helped establish: "Women have few opportunities here, so we developed the Women's Work Center as a place for collaboration, community, and a place to learn skills and earn an income," Barb says. "The women are earning an income for the first time in their lives and use the money to support their families and keep their children in school."

There are 20 women at the Center, where they make traditional beadwork arts to sell at safari camps and other places visited by tourists. "We introduced sewing a year ago," Barb continues. "Most of these women had never

touched a machine before this and now they have mastered sewing. Among other things, the women are eagerly making quality sanitary kits that help keep teen girls in school. In this area, as in many places in the world, girls drop out of school when they reach puberty, as they have no way to manage their period at school."

"We've distributed over 1,500 free sanitary kits recently to at-risk girls, and now the women are making another 500."

A delegation from Narok will visit Palo Alto in mid-April. Stay tuned for more news!



*"Most of these women had never touched a machine before this and now they have mastered sewing,"
says Neighbors Abroad's Narok VP, Barb Mackraz.*

[Palo, Leyte, the Philippines](#)

Join a Neighbors Abroad Delegation to
our Sister City (and beyond) in the
Philippines



Traveling to a different country with a purpose is a very different experience from simply being a tourist. Here's your opportunity to visit Palo Alto's Sister City in the Philippines in just such a capacity: From July 25 through August 10, 2025, a Neighbors Abroad delegation will be on the ground in Palo, Leyte and members of the Neighbors Abroad community are invited to join!

Palo VP and Neighbors Abroad board member Nodelyn Smith says the trip is focused on "the environment, sustainability, education, and culture." In addition to fun and educational activities, the trip affords an opportunity for our Palo Committee to catch up with our partner organization, the GIANTS, which runs the Children's Library, as well as local schools, teachers, and our scholarship recipients.

"On the eco tour, we will visit coastal environments like mangroves, marine sanctuaries, a sandbar island, rainforests, and a resettlement village," Nodelyn says. "We will be led by retired Professor of Biology from University of the Philippines, Marge de la Cruz. At Palo's Town Fiesta, we will be immersed in the culture and learn about Palo's importance during WWII." (Pictured above is the memorial that commemorates the historic landing of General Douglas MacArthur in the Leyte Gulf.)



If you are interested in learning more about this unique travel and educational opportunity, please contact:

nodelyn.smith@neighborsabroad.org

Help the Children's Library in Palo by

Participating in a Book Drive



Our Palo Alto Committee has partnered with the Gunn High School Key Club on a book drive and fundraiser for the Children's Library in Palo, Leyte, which Neighbors Abroad helped establish decades ago and which provides the young people of the region with an abundance of reading material. The Children's Library is one of Neighbors Abroad's most enduring, flagship projects, and we need your help to keep it going.

On May 1, between 5 and 8 p.m., members of the Key Club will be delivering donated books to the Palo Alto home of our board member Nodelyn Smith. Members of the community are invited to join the fun that evening and to drop off their own book donations. Nodelyn will serve an array of light bites from the Philippines. What is needed:

- Used books for preschoolers Aged 2-7;
- Newer-edition, used college textbooks in the science fields (for our Palo Alto scholarship recipients);
- School supplies, including crayons, coloring books, pencils, and blank paper;
- Used iPads and Kindles; and
- Cash donations to help defray the cost of shipping.

If you can't make it on May 1, we always are grateful for donations via [our website](#).

If you're interested in joining us on May 1, please contact:

nodelyn.smith@neighborsabroad.org

Heidelberg, Germany

Heidelberg Students 'BEAM' Into Palo Alto

For a number of years, Neighbors Abroad has been a champion of the BEAM (Business Entrepreneurship & Math) program, an entrepreneurial initiative that

teaches students business concepts through an immersive model. Students design and develop cross-curricular solutions to solve real-world problems while being mentored by industry professionals. The program, co-developed by a former Neighbors Abroad board member and rolled out at Gunn High School, has proven so impactful that several of our Sister Cities have gotten on board. Heidelberg, Germany has been an enthusiastic supporter of BEAM for a number of years.

And best of all, Heidelberg's participation in BEAM has led to an annual student exchange among BEAM participants in both cities.



In February, a dozen students from Heidelberg's *Hölderlin Gymnasium* were in Palo Alto for a week to collaborate with their American counterparts. Neighbors Abroad board member Bruce McLeod and Gunn BEAM instructor Emily Yun, among others, helped coordinate a jam-packed schedule of educational and cultural offerings.

The students presented app-development projects they had been working on, and attended a Gunn baseball game. Later in the week, they toured the Stanford and University of Santa Clara campuses where they met with business faculty and students. Councilman Pat Burt led his famous history tour of downtown Palo Alto, which included a City Hall visit and, of course, a photo-op at the Sister Cities sign on the City Hall plaza. The students visited Google and Intuitive Surgical and got to experience American college sports at a Stanford-Cal basketball game.

During spring break In April, Emily will lead Gunn BEAM students on a visit to Heidelberg.

Congratulations to our budding entrepreneurs!

Productive Meetings in Oaxaca Lay Groundwork for Future Projects

In March, Neighbors Abroad's co-VPs for Oaxaca, Ken and Flor Sanchez, traveled to Oaxaca for high-level meetings with the municipal government, including *Presidente Municipal* Raymundo Chagoya Villanueva. The Oaxacan team reported on the recently donated garbage truck that made the long journey from Palo Alto to Oaxaca last year and has since been plying the city streets, helping residents dispose of their garbage. Oaxaca has requested assistance with recycling and other projects and hopes to work closely with Palo Alto to ramp up its own recycling efforts.

We hope to see *Presidente* Chagoya and others in Palo Alto later this year when we host another *calenda* on California Avenue.



Ken and Flor also visited Coral, an organization that provides hard-of-hearing individuals, including children, with hearing aids. Through Neighbors Abroad, a generous donor has funded Coral's work in recent years and Ken and Flor were delighted to see how those donations are allowing Coral to better serve its clients.

Festive Holiday Party and Fundraiser Provided an Opportunity for a Recap of a Momentous 2024



Neighbors Abroad President Sarah Burgess, front left, with President-Elect Ed Fike in back, next to Palo Alto Mayor Ed Lauing and new Neighbors Abroad board member Claire Lauing.

Neighbors Abroad directors mingled with members and special guests from the City of Palo Alto at the annual holiday party on December 15. The festive event, which raises funds for Neighbors Abroad's children's programs in Oaxaca and Palo, was held at the Los Altos Hills home of President-Elect Edward Fike and his husband, Bill Jeffrey. President Sarah Burgess provided guests with a recap of a momentous 2024, which included a prestigious award from Sister Cities International (for the third straight year); a well-received art exhibition at the Palo Alto Art Center; a visit from Sweden's Crown Princess Victoria; student exchanges with Albi, Heidelberg, Tsuchiura and Oaxaca; the selection of Narok, Kenya as our first-ever Friendship City; and delegation visits either to or from nearly all of our nine Sister and Sibling Cities.

Cheerfully-attired guests enjoyed a sumptuous selection of multi-cultural cuisine donated by our generous restaurant partners Hobee's California Restaurants, Tacolicious, Vive Sol, Pizza My Heart, and Chef Zhao. Stalwart supporter Terun once again kept the premium wine flowing, and supplied extra cases for the myriad NA events planned for 2025.



A Message from
our Friends at the
UNAFF:

Submissions Open for Documentaries

Mark your calendars for the 28th UNAFF (United Nations Association Film Festival), which was founded in 1998 by Stanford educator and film critic Jasmina Bojic in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the signing of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Documentary filmmakers: Please consider submitting your work!

The 28th UNAFF will be held from October 16th to 26th in Palo Alto, East Palo Alto, San Francisco, and at Stanford University with the theme *MESSAGES FOR THE FUTURE*. As one of the oldest solely documentary film festivals in the US, UNAFF has grown and earned the respect of audiences and filmmakers alike for its fearless independence and integrity. In addition to providing early outlets for films, many of which later went on to win major awards and accolades, UNAFF "prides itself in creating a community forum with year-round programs facilitating education and dialogue about different cultures, issues, and solutions."

Please click [HERE](#) for details on how to submit a film.

Join Neighbors Abroad as a Member

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