



# My Brother from Abroad

WRITTEN BY ZOË WOLFF

Most kids beg their parents for a puppy. But in my family's case, we always wanted an international sibling to add to our home. In 2016, we unexpectedly ended up with Emilie from Denmark right before Thanksgiving. I was 5 at the time and loved having a big sister, but I was too young to fully appreciate the experience. Nearly a decade later in 2024, my younger brother, West, and I wanted another opportunity to bond with a foreign exchange student. But there were constraints, like whether there would be room in our house, could we convince mom and would we keep our bathroom tidy. After persistent persuading, we ultimately accepted that our plan failed.

My mom is the coordinator for a local foreign exchange organization and we would often help her look at potential students to be matched with Montana host families. That's when we came across Aituar, from Kazakhstan. I remember watching his video and reading through his introduction letter. He displayed every attribute of the ideal foreign exchange student: outgoing, friendly, dedicated, family-oriented and respectful. We were determined to find him a Bozeman host family, so he could fulfill his American dream. Despite my mom's hours of networking, the chances of her finding him a family were slim as the school application deadline loomed. Finally, my mom agreed that we could be his family. My brother and I were overjoyed!

It didn't take long to warm up to having a big brother. As a freshman at Gallatin High School, and Aituar a senior exchange student, we were both fresh to the American high school experience and navigated through it together. We even shared a couple of classes and could team up on projects (on which I did all the work). Aituar was passionate about basketball and had always dreamed of playing for an American team. After tryouts, with all of us anxious to hear whether he made the team, he told us that he hadn't made the cut. I didn't even have time to react before he cracked a smile and confessed that he was messing with us and that he did actually make the JV/Varsity team at GHS. We supported him by attending his basketball games. In addition to his natural athleticism, he was also a bright student. He maintained excellent grades and was devoted to his schoolwork. He was the best role model and big brother that I never imagined I'd have.

West, Aituar and I were like three peas in a pod. While our cultural differences took time to adjust to, we instantly developed a shared sense of humor. At the beginning of the year, West and I convinced Aituar that seemingly normal American words were "swear words" and laughed as he discreetly tried to say them without getting caught. I've only ever had a younger brother, but Aituar fit the stereotypical older brother role — like jokingly locking me in the pantry and wrestling with West. No one can convince me that he isn't our real brother.

I remember making our first Minecraft world together. What might be a regular video game for most, was a journey for us — we collaborated to make our first Minecraft house, and to beat the game. The dopamine we felt after beating the game was powerful, not only because we won, but because after all of our conflicts and disagreements, we won together. Immediately after winning, we accidentally burnt down our Minecraft house.

Hosting Aituar, and embarking on what once was just a fun cultural experience, has become a forever bond. As the end of the year approaches alarmingly fast, I'm cursed with the knowledge that Aituar's time here is limited. However, the memories are everlasting. As I enjoy my last few months with him, it's bittersweet. Even if we get another exchange student, and after Aituar goes back to Kazakhstan, no one will ever replace the spot in my heart for him. He will always be my big brother and a forever part of our family.

To learn more about hosting a foreign exchange student in Montana, please visit [icesusa.org/host-a-student-overview](https://icesusa.org/host-a-student-overview). Zoë, West and their mom, Sierra, will help you find the next member of your family. You can reach Sierra Fein directly by calling 406-570-2218. 📞

*Zoë Wolff is 14-years-old and attends Gallatin High School.*