At first glance, Senka Mekic is polite and soft-spoken. But, spend just a few minutes talking with this U.S. Department of State-funded American Serbia and Montenegro Youth Leadership Exchange (A-SMYLE) student and you’ll realize first impressions aren’t meant to last. Senka admits, “I’m not just a bit stubborn, I’m very stubborn!”

Senka, who left her native Serbia at just 17 years old to attend high school in the United States for a year, stumbled upon the program by complete chance. It was her brother that knew about the A-SMYLE program. When he went to the local high school to begin testing, Senka tagged along out of curiosity.

You can guess what happened next: Senka ended up taking the test on a whim. But, as she survived rounds one, two, and three of the application process, Senka didn’t fully believe that an experience like this could be possible.

Senka remarks, “When I saw the thousands of kids that applied I thought ‘Well, they will consider me, but I’ll be somewhere in the bottom of the pile.’ ”

When she received the call that she had been accepted to the program, she had mixed feelings of happiness and anxiety.

“I thought about giving up, but I thought about the experience and how much this was going to help, and I’m a person that’s not very easy to convince to do anything, and here, they were trying to send me overseas!”

Growing up with cerebral palsy in Serbia, Senka was raised just like her peers without disabilities. At school, she was the only student with a disability. At home, Senka moved about independently, but sometimes relied on her mom to support her with specific tasks.
“I was one of the lucky ones because I was attending a regular school with all the other kids. Until I was a teenager, I never felt or thought I was different in any way until I saw I wasn’t really the same like everybody else.”

**Fast Forward to the U.S. Experience**

The biggest challenge for Senka was immersion into a completely new environment.

Senka was introduced to a network of people who cared about her much like her own parents. Senka’s host mother, Marisa, says, “We did our best to make [the home environment] something that she could do by herself.” She adds, “We would ask, ‘Is there anything we could do differently? Is there anything that you need?’ ” to make sure Senka was as independent as possible.

At school, Senka was matched with a guidance counselor who was responsible for ensuring she had what she needed. It took some time to get settled in, especially in a school that was so much larger than she had experienced in Serbia.

For instance, Senka experienced fine motor difficulties with the combination lock on her locker, so she picked up a lock with a key instead. Because her locker was on the second floor and difficult for her to get to, Senka admits, “I stubbornly carried all of my books around on my back. Finally, I went to my guidance counselor and I asked for a locker on the first floor.”

Her guidance counselor was surprised that she had waited so long to bring up the issue. Senka shares, “That’s one of the things I would have done differently [in this experience], I would have gone to my counselor earlier.” Now at the end of her exchange experience, Senka’s thinking about studying public relations at a university in Turkey. The experience has reinforced what Senka knew about herself all along – that she is strong, independent, and talented – but now she has the tools to apply these traits in an international context.

I saw that I could make a difference even though I have a disability. I realized I could do the stuff that I wanted to do, but I didn’t know I could actually make a difference in the world. It was a very eye-opening feeling. It was very amazing.