

Stranger In A Strange Land

Sports, Interest In Others Ease Colombian Student's Exchange

BY SUSAN USHER

He has all the moves on the soccer field or the dance floor, converses with adults with ease, likes cars and people, and finds his classes a breeze. He's an all-around guy—with a difference.

Alvaro German Villa, or Al, as fellow students call him, comes from Bogota, a city of 6.5 million people, the capital of Colombia, to rural Brunswick County, population 55,000 perhaps; from a close-knit family of six with a live-in housekeeper, to a quiet host household of one, West Brunswick High School math teacher Susan Tubb of Varnamtown.

He's one of two American Field Service exchange students at West this year.

For Alvaro, joining the West Brunswick High School soccer team and now the tennis team, has helped smooth the way, making acceptance easier by both fellow students and the community at large. "People know me because I played soccer," he says.

Alvaro's father, German, is a civil engineer who manages a proprietary construction company. His mother, Carmen, is a homemaker. Al has two sisters, Pilar, 18, who was an exchange student last year in the United States, and Lilianna, 15, who hopes to come to America as an exchange student later. There's also a younger brother, Carlos, 8.

If he seems older and more mature than many students at West Brunswick, it may be because he is. Alvaro graduated from high school (11 grades) in Bogota in 1991 and went to college a semester before being placed by AFS. When he returns to Colombia in July he will begin the second semester of what will be five years of college studies for a degree in civil engineering—like his dad and his older sister.

As an exchange student, Villa gets to see the United States, Brunswick County and West Brunswick through different, though friendly eyes.

One of the things that has surprised Alvaro most is local students' lack of interest in being an exchange student themselves.

"Most people here aren't too interested in going anywhere else," he said. "They think this is the best place. In our country, everybody wants to go to another country (as an exchange student) for the experience."

Why volunteer to spend a year in a strange country? On his AFS application, Alvaro wrote, "I would like to experience a new way of living by myself away from my home, to make decisions in a different environment, to evaluate and 'valorate' my family. To learn about a

different culture, to live in a home with stepparents, to share with them new ideas; to attend school and to come back home more mature, more responsible and with a clear criteria to face the university years expecting me."

He also came with the idea of being a good ambassador for Colombian youth, "to let the new people around me learn who the Colombian youth is, its aim for progress, happy, healthy in all its ways, its love for sports and free of vice," he wrote. "I would like to show

where conversations between a father and a son may be just a 'Bye, I'm going out.'"

Other differences were also surprises. In Bogota, mass transportation means residents can go anywhere and don't need a car. "Not like here; they have this big parking lot," he says, gesturing toward the outside of the school. Alvaro relies on his host "Mom" and classmates for transportation.

School has been a new experience as well. He was ac-

Alvaro attended a middle-class public school, his younger sister is enrolled in a private girls' school and his little brother in a private boys' school.

While in the United States, Alvaro is experiencing as much of the country as he can. "He's been everywhere," said Tubb, his host parent. "We try to go someplace every weekend." He's also been to New York to visit cousins he'd never met before, to Cocoa Beach and Melbourne, Fla., with Tubb's fiancé, Bill, and on shorter trips.

Alvaro's also tried "local" activities, such as hunting and crabbing. He likes having the beach closer by; in Bogota it was 16 hours to the coast.

He's managed the many adjustments of being a stranger in a strange land quite well, building his English language skills in the process and carving friendships and memories that will last his lifetime.

However, Alvaro isn't the only person who had adjustments to make this year. Having an exchange student in the house has meant a few changes for Tubb, who had become accustomed to her privacy as a single woman.

"But the biggest adjustment is now having to cook every meal or make sure he gets a meal," said Tubb. "I wanted him to experience as much American food as possible."

Eating more, and more regularly, has made a few other differences, she claims. "We've joined the gym together."

She's getting a crash course in parenting, which for most people begins with an infant, but for her with an adolescent. Alvaro had only been in the house a few days before he called down the stairway, "Good night, Mom."

Tubb claims, "I don't know how to be a mom yet," but the two have developed a comfortable relationship. They're mostly good friends who enjoy each other's company. They've traveled together, laughed and worried and worshiped together, and from their windows overlooking Lockwood Folly River and the tides rise during the March 13 winter storm as they baked a ham and chili in the fireplace.

The two have only come close once to having a real argument. That was when Tubb heard early morning noises and thought Alvaro had missed his curfew and stayed out all night. She didn't speak to him most of that day and wasn't sure what to say; meanwhile he had no idea what was wrong and was hesitant to ask. Any mother can imagine Tubb's relief when a neighbor mentioned seeing Alvaro come in the previous night!

"He's different; he's a lot of fun," she says. "We've decided we're both going to cry in July. And when Bill and I get married, he's going to give me away."



STAFF PHOTO BY SUSAN USHER

COLOMBIAN EXCHANGE STUDENT Alvaro "Al" Villa and his host "mom," Susan Tubb, at the home overlooking Lockwood Folly River at Varnamtown they've shared this school year. Alvaro will remain here until July, when he will return to Bogota.

our culture, way of living and our economical development."

Alvaro's done everything he set out to do and more.

Here he's found some things the same, like the availability of fast food restaurants; others quite different, such as the parties young people attend and relationships with their families.

In his past experience "people have a good time and dance at a party; here people have no fun." And while there are no alcoholic beverage control regulations in Colombia, "there are not alcoholics like here."

"In my country the family is much closer. We spend a lot of time together," he says. "It's not like it is here

customed to high school students remaining in the same classroom all day, a college-type class schedule, and teachers changing rooms. More grade levels are contained in the same school and students are grouped as a class when they enter school and remain together in ensuing years. "That's really close," he said of the bonds that develop as a result.

He finds school here "much easier" than in heavily-industrialized Bogota, where his six years of English, two years of physics, two years of chemistry and one year of geometry were part of the standard curriculum at his school.

In Bogota, families have a choice of sending their children to state or Catholic parochial schools. While

Community College Names Six Ambassadors For 1993-94

Six Ambassadors have been chosen by Brunswick Community College for the 1993-94 school year.

They are Jan Irene Carlton, an administrative office technology student from Supply; Sue Madison, a general education student from Shallotte; Dwane R. "Rusty" Mitchiner Jr., an electronics engineering student from Bolivia; Katherine V. Graham, an administrative office technology student from Bolton; Angela L. Rattley, an administrative office technology student from Leland; and Thelma Boyer, a cosmetology student from Wilmington;

With the support of the Brunswick Community College Foundation, the program was expanded this year to include six instead of five ambassadors.

Ambassadors serve the college in a variety of public relations assignments, as campus tour guides, ushers for special events, speaking to civic groups and participating in parades. Candidates are nominated by faculty and staff, and screened for grades and other factors. Finalists are selected on the basis of an essay in which nominees describe why they want to become a BCC Ambassador and interviewed by a selection committee which makes the final cut.

Once chosen, ambassadors are expected to log three to five hours a week in service to either the college or the community while maintain-



BCC PHOTO BY ANNE MARIE BELLAMY

BRUNSWICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE Ambassadors for 1993 are (from left) Dwane R. "Rusty" Mitchiner Jr., Katherine V. Graham, Angela L. Rattley, Thelma Boyer, Jan I. Carlton and Sue Madison.

ing a 3.0 grade point average, attending at least 75 percent of all classes, and meeting weekly with their advisor, Resource Development Officer Glenn Barefoot.

They receive specialized training in public speaking, personal development and leadership, a merit scholarship from the BCC Foundation and a special wardrobe consisting of a distinctive navy blazer,

polo shirt, tie, and skirt or pants. A dean's list student, Carlton is active in the Student Government Association and National Vocational-Technical Honor Society at BCC. After earning her administrative office technology degree, she is considering continuing her education in medical records technology or pursuing a career working with children.

Madison served on BCC's real estate program advisory board in 1991-92, and serves as Sunday School superintendent and on the administrative council of Seaside United Methodist Church. She plans to transfer to Cameron Business School at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington to major in accounting.

Mitchiner has served on the BCC

audiovisual project team as well as representing electronics engineering curriculum students as an SGA Senator. He is a member of the National Vocational-Technical Honor Society, works full-time for Lowe's of Southport, and is an American Red Cross volunteer. He has worked with mentally and physically handicapped individuals as a rehabilitation facilitator and is a

petty officer third class in the U.S. Naval Reserves, SeaBee Battalion.

His goals include completing a real estate course at BCC and obtaining a North Carolina real estate sales license, and graduating from the electronics engineering technology program.

Graham is a dean's list student and a member of the National Vocational-Technical Honor Society who enjoys getting involved with others. She wants to pursue a career in the medical field after earning her associate degree.

Rattley plays softball and likes to spend time with children.

Boyer was coordinator for a fashion show and hair competition staged by the cosmetology department serves as South Atlantic regional vice president, Oakwood College National Alumni Association; member, board of directors for My Brother's Keeper; and is active in the Seventh Day Adventist Church as a hospitality chairperson, personal ministries assistant leader, deaconess and Sunday School teacher.

She wants to open a five-chair salon, then return to BCC's cosmetology instructor training program, and later open a larger salon and boutique.

Brunswick Community College is one of 20 of the state's community colleges with an ambassador program.