

Onalaska Student, 16, Earns Scholarship to Study Russian in Estonia, Moldova
By Kyle Spurr / kspurr@chronline.com | Posted: Saturday, August 16, 2014 1:09 am

Since taking a family trip to Thailand two years ago, 16-year-old Gavin VanClifford has wanted to study abroad.

VanClifford, entering his junior year at Onalaska High School, recalls taking a boat ride in Thailand with a Swedish family. The Swedish family asked VanClifford's parents, "Why wouldn't your son be an exchange student? Our daughter did it."

VanClifford said that moment cemented the fact that he wanted to be abroad.

"After that, I caught on to the idea and made it my own," VanClifford said.

The opportunity to study abroad came earlier this year when VanClifford was awarded a National Security Language Initiative for Youth scholarship for 2014-15. He will study the Russian language in Moldova and Estonia.

The NSLI-Y program is a free program funded by the U.S. Department of State and provides merit-based scholarships for eligible high school students to learn less commonly-taught languages in overseas immersion programs, the program said.

About 625 students across the country each year qualify for the program. About 18 students will be with VanClifford in Moldova and Estonia.

VanClifford will travel to Washington, D.C., for orientation later this month to prepare and learn more about his host family before flying to Moldova. He will spend September to early January in Moldova and late January to May in Estonia. He will return home to Onalaska May 31.

VanClifford, who has studied Spanish at Centralia College, said he is interested in learning more about the Russian language and culture.

"The language itself sounds fun to learn and the alphabet has more letters than it does in English," VanClifford said. "The culture has been (negatively) portrayed in a lot of movies. It would be really interesting to see what Russia is actually like."

VanClifford will be staying in the capital cities in Moldova and Estonia, away from the current conflicts in the Ukraine and Russia.

"I will be within a couple hundred miles, which doesn't sound like a lot," VanClifford said. "But it always seems like it is worlds away. I'm not really worried about it."

As an exchange student, VanClifford will be in a four-hour language class five days a week. On Saturdays, his class will have cultural excursions to historic landmarks.

"It's about the immersing experience. You are not going to learn the language unless you talk to people, so hopefully I will get to do a lot of that," VanClifford said. "It's definitely going to be a different culture."

When VanClifford returns home next year, he will take summer classes to stay on pace for graduation. Having the opportunity to spend a year in another culture will be worth the extra school work, he said.

"Being an exchange student, I've wanted to do that for a while," he said.