Bananas! Coconuts! Shark attack! Ninja! The cries and songs of the National Youth Science Forum in January 2011 that brought so much fun to over 400 year 12 students still bring back many fond memories. NYSF challenged the direction that I wanted to take in science, beyond the curriculum and find a field I would be passionate in. For me, NYSF would have been the most exciting activity in high school to date, had not Geoff Burchfield, director of NYSF, and rang me during school. With the usual ruckus at the end of lunchtime, along with the drone of bagpipes playing in the background, I could just barely hear Geoff, but all I knew was that I was going to go to be going to the Canada Wide Science Fair and I was ecstatic! The NYSF program had yet another surprise!

As with any international excursion, it all started at the airport. Six Australians and Geoff, eagerly meeting at Sydney airport, Mark, Juliet, Kristina, James, and Sarah. Via Los Angeles, we arrived at San Francisco, where we stayed overnight and had dinner with Kathy, David, and Jacob, friends of Geoff. The next day we arrived in Toronto, relatively intact, except for some missing baggage! With our toy mascots, we stepped onto Canadian soil for a great two weeks ahead.

Seven Australians and five hundred science fair finalists, and delegates were hosted at Seneca College, Toronto. When we started setting up the next day, as soon as the Australian flag went up, it was a beacon for the finalists to bombard us with questions, “What is Vegemite? Do you really train kangaroos? Do you have anything to trade? You have an accent!” Friendships were forged over conversations learning about the different regions of Canada from Ottawa to Manitoba; from trading pins, flags, and kangaroo clips, hearing about the different projects and seeing the dedication and hard work that have taken students from their school, to district, to regional, and finally, to the national finals.
Throughout the day, we had opportunities to visit all the science projects. The level of understanding, confidence and creativity was evident in all grades. Projects ranged from an Airless High Efficiency Dryer based on vacuum technology, redesigning helmets to prevent concussions, a wide variety of cancer research such as Eastern vs. Western medicines and cancer suppression, water purification and oil extraction applications too. It was amazing to hear junior students talking about intricate concepts that we were just learning in our final HSC year!

Unlike the five hundred or so finalists, the Australians were unique in that we were promoting Australian universities and science, and judging the Australian Prize – selecting three students to participate in NYSF 2012. Being on the other side of the interview was quite an experience and certainly not to be forgotten. Congratulations to Joe, Jessie, and Moriah, who were selected to come to NYSF 2012. You really impressed us with your enthusiasm for science, charisma and interest in Australia. I really hope that you’ll enjoy Canberra next year!

From Toronto, we flew to Calgary and started our one-week tour of the Rockies. With Geoff at the wheel of our Dodge, we headed off to the Rockies through to Vancouver, passing through Banff and Jasper. We stopped at many spectacular locations such as Royal Tyrell Museum, Lake Louise, Banff hot springs, Athabasca Glacier, and Athabasca Falls. And there was snow! Thankfully we visited Canada before all the snow had melted away, leaving plenty of time for forest walks, snow fights, snowmen, and maple syrup plus snow treats. On the second last day, there was even snowfall, and Geoff kindly stopped on the way to Vancouver where we jumped out straight into the softest, most powdery snow ever.

Along the way, we stayed in several Hostel International Lodges. Two that I would highly recommend are Mosquito Creek Wilderness Hostel, and Squilax Hostel. At Mosquito Creek outside of Banff, we stayed in an alpine hut in the middle of Canadian forests, covered in low snow. With no electricity, showers, we all headed to the rustic sauna, a refreshing start to the road trip ahead. At Squilax, we stayed overnight in Cabooses, going beaver sighting and early morning canoeing in Shuswap Lakes.
I met some delightful people at CWSF all through Canada. Everyone was fascinating to talk to, the Canadian students providing an immense insight to their high level and passion for sciences. I had a most enjoyable time with my Australians companions. Mark’s captivating wild stories and cooking; James’s first rate photography, capturing some 5000 photos; Juliet’s never-ever-ending generosity and gifts, Kristina’s unique humour and vibrancy lighting up any activity, and Sarah’s energy in every snow fight. And Geoff too! With his constant optimism that never faltered throughout the entire program, I don’t think we could have had a better guide. CWSF may have set us all back a little in terms of school work, but I believe it was an unique experience that has focused my determination to take the most out of high school, and for the greater goal of developing friendships in unknown environments. I think that we all have left a little of ourselves back in Canada and can’t wait to go back there while in our pursuit in science. To fire hydrants, Wale, gas tanks, and marsupials – go Canada!

My most sincere thanks to my chemistry and physics teachers, Mr Andrew Weeding, and Mr Martin Barkl, for encouraging me to apply on the NYSF and CWSF program. And to the NSW Office of Science and Medical Research (OSMR) for generously supporting the NSW students on the trip and encouraging students partake in all fields of science. To my school Headmaster, Mr John Weeks, for all the fantastic opportunities and assistance at Knox Grammar that led to NYSF, and finally, to St. Ives Rotary for finding time amongst their widespread program to support the NYSF program, and care for their students.