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## German studies bring cultures together

**Exchange program, now in its 30th year, even brings marriages**

**BY LILY LANGERUD**

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As Oakdale's Tartan High School celebrates the 30th year of its German exchange program, six former students have settled into a much more permanent exchange and are looking forward to celebrating anniversaries of their own.

Three marriages have occurred since the start of the program in 1975, with two couples living in the United States and one in Germany.

For Jason and Sandra Robertson it was love at first sight. They met in 1989 when Sandra was a teaching assistant in Jason's German class at Tartan High School.

Now, the Robertsons live in Woodbury with their three children and plan on teaching German to all of them. The oldest, 5-year-old Kiley, attends classes at the Germanic-American Institute in St. Paul.

And there's another class this fall at Tartan and other possibilities for connections.

Tartan hosted 24 students from Essen this fall for 18 days, and will do the same this spring with students from Berlin. The Essen program has been active since 1975 and the Berlin program started in 1994. The Tartan class travels to Germany every summer, switching between the two cities, going to Essen this summer and Berlin next summer.

At first glance, it is hard to tell the American and German students apart. Most wear jeans and hooded sweatshirts; two have matching blue highlights in their hair. Only their accents give away their nationalities. Each American student has a German partner, chosen from information packets the Tartan students received last spring.

The exchange students spend three days shadowing their partners in classes and the rest of their time touring the Twin Cities. For those who hadn't visited the United States before, the "bigness" of everything was a surprise. "Everything is big," said Jenny Runge, a 16-year-old Essen student. This was a plus for Virginia Gralla, another Essen student whose favorite destination was the Mall of America. Staying in Oakdale, Runge became aware of distances. "I think here you can see the distances are very long between things," she said.

Amy Autenrieb was a Tartan student when she met her husband, Jan, during the Berlin exchange in 1994. After trying a long-distance relationship, Jan moved to the United States and they married in 2002. The Autenriebs live in Vadnais Heights with their two children. The youngest, at 18 months, will probably attend German immersion classes as soon as she's old enough, but the 8-year-old "just laughs when (Jan) speaks to her in German because he sounds funny," Autenrieb said.

The German students speak mostly English while they are here, because it gives them practice. The American students find their partners can be a big asset in helping with homework. "At first you take a language because it's required, but then it's so cool to be able to apply the years you spent at a desk in situations with students your own age," said Laura Weldy, a 16-year-old Oakdale student.

Living in their partners' homes, the German students learn more about American schools. "They don't go to

bed," said Justis Heising, of his American partner, "and there is very much homework to do." School rules are also somewhat of a shock: German students are not used to needing a hall pass to go to the bathroom. "There are a lot of security measures," said Birthe Dobertin, an Essen student.

The class receives no money from the school, so public transportation is a must. "One of the things that they really have to adjust to is the fairly pathetic mass transit system," said Dave Rutledge, a Tartan German teacher who has managed the exchange program since 1998.

The students travel to places like Fort Snelling, the Mill City Museum and the Renaissance Festival. For the German students, the emphasis is on traveling and learning about American culture, not schoolwork. "We are realistic enough to know that taking a student who is technically on vacation and putting them in a classroom for two weeks isn't the best use of time," said Rutledge.

Rutledge said he believes the exchange program is essential to the German program at Tartan. "I think the educated class of any country has got to have a knowledge of other cultures," he said. Additionally, Spanish and French typically attract the most students. "If we didn't have an exchange program, I don't know if I'd have a job anymore, because German isn't the most popular language," he said.

Rutledge said that former Tartan German teacher Peg Fiel was responsible for starting the program in 1975, and although she has since retired (Rutledge took over the program for her in 1998), she continues to be involved and donates money to help with program expenses. Although Rutledge said the program "is the most labor-intensive" thing he does, he believes that it offers students the best opportunity to learn about another culture.

Rutledge's students were quiet on the dating history of the program. If there are any love connections, they're not telling "It's about meeting people, even if you don't get married to them," Weldy said.

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