

## THE CANADIANS ARE COMING

The most efficient and fun way to learn a language is to live where it is spoken. If this is not possible, then bring the language to the homes and lives of students. In the spring of 2002, that is what we did at Westchester Academy in Houston, TX. From the numerous possible pen pals the AATF sent, we selected *Académie les Estacades*, near Trois Rivières, Québec.

Because parents are justifiably apprehensive about contact on-line with people, preliminary contact between teachers is imperative. Everyone was more comfortable that the mails were genuine when they understood the names came from AATF contacts; Mr. Douville and I exchanged e-mails on numerous occasions before student contact; and the Canadian school had a Web site.

Westchester students corresponded with the Canadians throughout the spring, some with more regularity than others. Most were diligent with dictionaries and constant requests of "How do I write ... in French?" When they got answers from Canada, students were thrilled and proudly read their e-mails to everyone. Some even continued the e-mails over the summer, and they all seemed to enjoy the assignment.

In the fall Mr. Douville and I settled on dates, and then he had his forty students fill out an extensive questionnaire detailing personal preferences and pastimes. Several French and Spanish National Honor Society students worked tirelessly to find homes for everyone including the four teacher chaperones. This student assistance was also great publicity for our program. Word spread, and the exchange quickly became "an event." Even students not enrolled in foreign languages were volunteering their help and hospitality.

The next task was to make a good first impression. The upper level Westchester students planned the reception carefully. With virtually no budget, students transformed our cafeteria into a spectacular area with giant paper replicas of hot air balloons, one designed like the Canadian flag and the other the flag of Quebec. Each table had red, white, and blue balloons as centerpieces with matching butcher paper for tablecloths.

Host parents generously volunteered to prepare a typical Texas barbecue for the welcome dinner. The decorations and warm hospitality were examples of collaborative learning and community involvement at its best.

After the Monday-morning orientation, Canadian students attended classes with their hosts. Everyone was in an area with teacher supervision. My students scheduled sightseeing during our statewide tests. Ca-

nadians toured downtown, the baseball stadium, Rice University, and the livestock show. So our guests would not have all the fun, there were also joint weekend activities for everyone.

The students wanted our visitors to see what an international city we have, so they arranged for two Canadian executives working in Houston give their perspectives: the Director of Bank of Montreal from Toronto and a Québécois from Air Liquide. Canada now seems much closer, not merely a distant place on the map.

The final night of the visit, there was another typical American dinner—hot-dogs. Again, parents generously provided food, and students ordered pecan fudge shaped like a map of Texas to give as their last Texas souvenir. The next morning at 5:00 a.m. in the school parking lot there was plenty of crying as "our" Canadians left for the airport.

All Westchester students who hosted a Canadian kept a journal that included copies of e-mails, a description of their guests, daily activities, new vocabulary, and an evaluation of the program. Advanced students wrote in French. Beginning students worked with their Canadian guests to put as much as possible in French. These portfolios are a strong testament to the energy, enthusiasm, and learning that occurred.

Students are already talking about our reciprocal trip to Canada next spring. For our school, and hopefully for the Canadians, the visit was a success, and benefits were enormous. Not only did students improve language skills, they developed an admiration and understanding of our northern neighbors. With only a gentle push in the right direction, they skillfully arranged and participated in activities that will always be some of their fondest high school memories.

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