

SWAAF: COLLEGIALLY AND COLLABORATION YIELD RICH REWARDS

What do you do on Saturday mornings? For the past six years a group of dynamic, enthusiastic, creative, and resourceful teachers of French have been meeting at different schools and universities in south-east Wisconsin. Three times a year, we meet at various locations to share ideas and experiences, to discuss and plan events, and to support one another in so many ways, large and small. Our meetings are quite informal (no Robert's Rules here!), and in the beginning, attendance may have just gotten above the half dozen mark a few times. Nonetheless, a real sense of purpose and necessity had been established early on, and *de bouche à oreille*, news of our meetings spread. At our most recent meeting in September 2002, about forty teachers, some from as far away as Green Bay and Lacrosse, met at Wauwatosa East High School to plan for National French Week 2002, to hear news of upcoming events and films at area schools and universities, to celebrate the 2006 AATF annual convention which will take place in Milwaukee, and to enjoy a sneak preview of Ann Line's amazing Fulbright experience in Morocco and Tunisia which she would later present at the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers' (WAFLT) annual convention. Four hours later, we adjourned, our bags weighing heavily with the handouts from Ann, Gabrielle Verdier, Julie Rose, and Anita Alkhas and our heads buzzing with fresh ideas for the new school year. Another successful SWAAF meeting.

So what is SWAAF, and how has it become such a successful organization? Although it wasn't until March 2002 that the Southeast Academic Alliance in French became an "official" organization, the idea of such an organization was born of conversations between Gabrielle Verdier (Professor of French, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) and Martine Meyer (Professor Emeritus of French, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) in 1996. They sensed a real need for communication and networking among teachers of French in the Milwaukee area. The Wisconsin chapter of the AATF meets only once a year, during the WAFLT convention, and the *Alliance française de Milwaukee*, while strong and active, serves a wider audience than just teachers of French.

Clearly a void needed to be filled. The first meeting I attended was held on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) campus in September 1997 and included university faculty from UWM, Marquette University, Mount Mary College, area

elementary, middle and high school French teachers, and representatives from the Milwaukee chapter of the *Alliance française*. As noted earlier, a clear sense of purpose was established at that very first meeting, which was to support each other while promoting the teaching of French as a world language. At our meetings, we focus on key issues that will help improve and advance our classroom instruction.

We have enjoyed several sessions dedicated to the use of technology in the classroom (Web sites, DVD, TV5, for example). We have invited guest speakers, such as the French Cultural Attaché and the Public Affairs Attaché of the *Bureau commercial du Québec*, both from Chicago, who brought with them a wealth of information and support materials for teachers.

We have welcomed university professors from other disciplines as well as community members, all of whom have shared so much. And, of course, we have been our own "guest speakers," like Ann Line, sharing our personal experiences with the goal of improving students' experiences in and out of the classroom.

Our sessions have included using film and music in the classroom, discussion of textbooks and pedagogical approaches, and oral proficiency and standards. But more than anything else, we have planned, orchestrated, sponsored or co-sponsored some amazing (and sometimes not so amazing) events.

One of our first successes was held in conjunction with the Wisconsin Sesquicentennial celebration. In Spring 1998, with support from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, the French and Quebec governments, and GE Medical, the Wisconsin French Connections Fair was held at UWM. Students from all over the southeast Wisconsin area were invited to submit projects related to French heritage in Wisconsin, which were later used to create the Wisconsin French Connections Web site [www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/project]. Nearly 2000 students and teachers participated in the event, the success of which provided the momentum for French Performance Day in April 1999. Over 800 students attended and participated in a variety show held at Mount Mary College in Milwaukee, performing skits and singing songs in French.

Although less successful than the Fair, we were inspired to plan our first National French Week celebration for November 1999, which featured several concerts, films, special menus at Milwaukee area restaurants, poetry readings and an official

declaration from Mayor Norquist to plan events both large and small, with the desire of providing opportunities for students to experience French outside the classroom. For example, UWM hosts the annual French Film Festival in February, for which SWAAF members help select the films to be shown. UWM and Marquette University have welcomed guest speakers from all over the Francophone world, discussing topics ranging from the status of French as a world language to globalization in Africa. Through connections with the *Alliance française*, we have been able to bring concerts to the Milwaukee area for students and the general public.

This past year, 2002, was an exciting year for SWAAF. Due to the perseverance of Gabrielle Verdier, SWAAF became an official consortium March 26, when representatives from fifteen area schools, Mount Mary College, Marquette University and UWM, signed an agreement in an official ceremony held at UWM.

At our winter meeting, held at Nicolet High School, we celebrated the rich and diverse culture of Senegal. Professor Cheryl Ajrotutu (UWM) brought to life the university's Senegal study abroad program in an animated PowerPoint presentation. In addition, members of the growing Senegalese community in Milwaukee shared perspectives of their homeland through personal narratives, traditional dishes, music, and clothes. Inspired by this dynamic session, SWAAF decided to sponsor a concert featuring West African music to coincide with National French Week in November. Professor Anita Alkhas (UWM) and I worked together to write requests for AATF and WAFLT grants to help underwrite the concert. Fortunately, we received both grants, and over 650 students from as far away as Appleton, Oshkosh, and Kettle Moraine, as well as the Milwaukee area, enjoyed an interactive concert given by Lucky Diop and Ajula, held at the Milwaukee School of Languages. In addition to the outstanding West African drumming and dancing of Lucky Diop and his students, the audience was treated to a song by the second graders of the Milwaukee French Immersion School. As the concert ended, I felt an incredible sense of accomplishment and pride in being involved in such a successful organization. Watching the charming seven and eight year olds sing so proudly, and the graceful young ladies dance to the intense drums of Lucky Diop and his apprentices, I was truly amazed at how well collaboration works and how amazing the

payoff can be. None of the performers on stage had ever heard of SWAAF, but here we were all together, sharing our passion for life, for French, and for intercultural communication and appreciation through music, song, and dance.

As I consider the mission of SWAAF, to support each other while promoting French as an international language, I see the rewards of six years of collaboration and collegiality, and I am delighted. As language teachers, each of us has unique personal experiences and connections which, when brought together, have incredible potential. The synergy I witness at SWAAF meetings and events is proof of this.

SWAAF continues to grow and expand. Our February meeting, *Carnaval sur le Québec*, featured three *Québécois* SWAAF members in addition to a preview of "When Wisconsin was New France," produced by the Wisconsin Historical Society. We hope to launch our own Web site this year, and we will continue to pursue grant opportunities to provide professional development options for our members. With the help of the Wisconsin chapter of the AATF, and the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers, in addition to all of the members of SWAAF and its charter institutions, *le français et la Francophonie* have a new presence in the Milwaukee area which I am confident will continue to grow. *À suivre...*

Margaret Schmidt Dess
Shorewood High School