

FRENCH DAY 2004

French Day has become a tradition for Hinsdale South's French students. In August at the start of school every year, one of the first questions the French 2,3, and 4 students ask is when French Day will be held. The next question is what we will be doing. Some students want to make sure we sing, and others want to dance. Still others want to know if they will be seeing a French feature film as strange as the one I showed the previous year. French is a minority language here, and the students know that they get a special day every year devoted to entertaining French activities, something the other language students do not get.

The making of French Day 2004 started with the end of French Day 2003. How does one better complement an African drumming group (The Djembé Project of Chicago) than with an African dance performance? One of the aims of our French Day activities is to sensitize the students to the existence of French in other regions in the world. We were lucky to find a group (The Mbongi Dance Theater), via an Internet search, that was not terribly far from Chicago. The problem was that it would be expensive to bring a group of seven dancers and drummers to school from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Thus began the round of grant writing and candy sale fund raising.

We are very fortunate that the administration supports our efforts. I always apply for grant money from our Booster Club and the Hinsdale South Foundation, both of which are dedicated to supporting student-centered activities that would otherwise not be funded. Our principal always puts in a good word for us. I have also received AATF Small Grants in the past. This year all three entities blessed us with almost enough money to cover the project for 2004. What was left would have to come from candy sales which we are still conducting. Setting a date is easy. Whatever day the stage is free of a play set is the date for French Day. Since our plays go on back to back, there are few choices. In order to stay in the good graces of the theater department, I am extremely conscientious of leaving all the facilities in better condition than we found them. The gentleman in charge of deaf drama, set construction, lighting, and other technical matters has helped us so much over the years. Who else could come up with an ingenious and simple way to display the large borrowed map of Africa on the stage for the cultural presentation? He also set up an enormous cardboard Eiffel

Tower he had stashed away from years ago. It actually worked well, showing the blending of African and French cultures.

Food is always a focus of the day. Whether we have an outside group or simply present our own activities, we have a breakfast of *croissants* and *chocolat chaud* during first period while the students get their name tags and I take attendance, and then a snack of *tablettes de chocolat* the last period during the prize distribution of buttons and pencils and any other trifles I have been able to procure. A feature film takes up a lot of class time, so this is my opportunity to show something we would not otherwise be able to see in class. We cannot switch lunches, so students are free to stay in the auditorium while others are at lunch. Students are welcome to attend any class they feel they cannot miss, especially if there is a test, but they can stay in the auditorium as well for small group singing and dancing during lunch.

To take care of the various tasks, I recruited volunteers. One student did daily French trivia during the all school announcements. Others put up signs around the building. A committee of hucksters sold French candy during lunch. French Club and National French Honor Society members helped with crowd control and prize distribution. My theater fanatics took care of the dance troupe backstage and in the dressing rooms. Others met the Lyons Township High School group and ushered them to their seats.

This year the local papers sent a photographer, and some of my students who are on the school paper and yearbook staffs took photos, too. We got coverage of the students on the stage dancing with the African performers in both papers, and I hope we appear in the yearbook. I regret that I did not think of getting our audiovisual department to videotape the performance.

In order to share the largesse this year, I invited some neighboring schools to attend the show. Donna Czarnecki brought two busloads of students, so I felt that the AATF funding did double duty. All of us got up on stage for the wild dancing at the end. Even the boys will get up and dance if their crazy teachers do it. What fun!

All our students and the teachers who attended this year's activities would like to thank everyone who helped make French Day 2004 a huge success.

Patricia Olderr
Hinsdale South High School
Darien, IL