

HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGE: ROCKRIDGE, ILLINOIS & AGEN, FRANCE

My room was cleaned, the grades were posted, and summer had finally arrived! I was lazily surfing the Web one rainy morning in June of 2003 when I found a posting on the AATF site. It was a request for pen pals, posted by a teacher in France. I responded, and she and I began an e-mail correspondence which became a daily routine.

By the time school started again in the fall, Judy Dubois and I had become well-acquainted over the Internet. In early September, she proposed that our classes not only be pen pals but also exchange visits, the way she had done with other classes in Great Britain in previous years. I was very hesitant. It is a huge project, and I am the only French teacher in a small rural high school. Would there be enough interested students? Would the school board approve? Who would help me? How would we get the money for such a big project?

As I began asking students in school and parents at our fall open house, it was obvious that the interest was there. The school board gave me a green light, and the interested parents voted unanimously to work hard to support the project. Everything was a go! We recruited host families for 13 students from the *Lycée Jean-Baptiste de Baudre*, in Agen, France. We began a flurry of activity to raise funds to pay for excursions for our guests for their two week stay.

Our fundraisers began with French club selling bonbons. From there, we sold concessions at basketball games and wrestling meets, we wrote and called local businesses for donations, we sold candles, we sold Mardi Gras beads, we held a Spaghetti Supper with a silent auction of gift baskets of donated items, we made chocolate roses from chocolate kisses that we sold for Valentine's Day, and we sold balloons to pop and get a prize for St. Patrick's Day. We also had parents and students selling candy bars, we held two bake sales, and we contributed to a community-wide yard sale. Our most productive fundraiser was our Trivia Night at a local American Legion hall.

Our fifteen guests arrived April 3 at O'Hare Airport. We were there in three borrowed vans to drive them the three hours back to the Quad Cities area. Their first week was our spring break, and we showed them the area by taking them on many excursions in our area, in carpools driven by parents. First, we went to a local IMAX theater and had a Scavenger Hunt at the mall.

That helped them with their English skills, and it began the friendships with their American hosts. We then took them on a tour of a John Deere factory and the John Deere World Headquarters. We took them on a tour and lunch at a local university, and we took them to a hockey game. One highlight of their trip was our riverboat luncheon cruise on the Mississippi River. They were so excited to be on the "Mighty Mississippi!" We also went to a local movie multiplex theater to see a real American movie *Starsky and Hutch*. (They were amazed that there



were no subtitles!) Then, they drove go-carts and played laser tag at a fun center.

They spent Easter with their host families (Mme Dubois and her colleague stayed with me) and the following week in school at Rockridge High School. Each day in school, they had two hours of English classes with their own teachers, then they went to hands-on demonstration classes around the school, put on by teachers in the school who had volunteered. They learned songs in choir, discussed farming practices in agriculture, made appetizers in home economics, learned on the computers, went to gym classes, had a fiesta with a Spanish class and even made plastic things in shop class.

Our biggest trip was to Chicago along with all those students at the high school enrolled in French. We took two charter buses first to the Hancock Tower where we went up to the Observatory. From there we went shopping and then to Wrigley Field for an all-American baseball game. The French students were lucky enough to see two out-of-the-park, back-to-back home runs! What an experience for us all!

At the end of their last week, we had a going-away cookout of hamburgers and hot

dogs at one family's home. The day they left, there were so many tears we had to get out the tissues. Real friendships and bonds had formed between the American and French students and teachers alike.

Our guests were very diplomatic; they carefully sidestepped any political issues, and we did the same. The friendships formed were cross-cultural and genuine... some of my students who hadn't been interested in a trip to France are now planning on going themselves to see these new friends on their own. Several of the French students are actively organizing yearlong exchanges to the U.S. now that they've had a taste of American hospitality! In my classes, I see a real difference in attitude now: what had been theory is now authentic in my students' minds. They're using the language more spontaneously and more creatively, and the interest in French has shown in my enrollment numbers for next year.

Our local AATF chapter was not able to financially support us, but we received an AATF Small Grant to help with the funding of this project. With the grant, we were able to pay for the riverboat luncheon cruise on the Mississippi River and the some of the admission to the Hancock Tower Observatory. Our thanks go to AATF for this support in making a memorable trip for our guests.

We raised over \$5000 for this project. It cost our group approximately \$195 for each teacher and guest student while they were here. We provided all the transportation and excursion fees for our guests while they were in Illinois. In turn, I brought a group of seven of my students to France on Memorial Day weekend, for a two-week stay with our new friends. I held language classes in their school, and my students attended some classes in their *lycée* in other subjects. Their group treated us to many excursions and field trips, (to museums, *châteaux*, fortified cities, wineries, etc.) with all the expenses paid for by their fundraising efforts on "their side of the pond." The highlight of our trip was a ride on the TGV to Bordeaux, where we toured the city and shopped.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to AATF for your support of this program. It was a life-changing and enriching experience for us, for our entire school, and the whole community. *Merci bien!*

Deb Flaughter
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