

## FRENCH AMAZONIAN CULTURE COMES TO NEW JERSEY



When French teacher Joelle Gozlan met Yannick Theolade, leader of Djokan (a dance, drum, and martial arts group) in French Guiana, she learned about Guyanese culture and the challenges of keeping the native Amazonian culture alive. Thinking it would be a great opportunity and experience for students to have the group visit our schools in Basking Ridge, NJ, a plan was made and an AATF Small Grant application submitted.

The students did a variety of fundraisers throughout the year—car washes, bake sales, sticker sales. We also received generous PTO donations from both the William Annin Middle School and Ridge High School, in addition to the AATF Small Grant.

The Djokan group spent four days at the high school and middle school. At the middle school, the group met with French classes and taught students about French Guiana and their martial arts. The students then tried some of the martial arts movements based on Amazonian animals. They did movements such as “tig” and “crabe” and realized that it was not as easy as it looked.

At the high school, the members met with all French classes, world history classes, vocational studies, and dance classes. The students learned firsthand about the culture and history of the country as well as traditional dance moves. Even students who don’t study French had heard about the visit-

ing group and stopped by the French rooms to say how excited they were to have Djokan come to their class.

After-school activities included two separate sessions of yoga for teachers and parents. Both were well-attended and well-received by all participants.

The main event of the week was a performance, led and planned by the students in the French Culture class called Ridge Co-Exists. Student groups sang, danced, played music, and did speaking performances in French, Italian, Arabic, and American Sign Language. The finale of the of the night was Djokan. The group played music, sang, and did a martial arts performance for the crowd of about 500 community members. It was truly breathtaking, and at the end of their performance, the group received an instant standing ovation.

At the end of the week, Djokan visited New York City for the first time before heading back to French Guiana.

The students and the community truly appreciated the entire event and were very receptive of the group. Without the AATF Small Grant, we would not have been able to completely fund Djokan’s journey to New Jersey. *Merci* for helping us share a little Francophonie with our community; these events are something the students and community will not forget!

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