

WILLKOMMEN: German high school students receive warm welcome in Newtown Borough as part of exchange program with Council Rock

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NEWTOWN >> Nineteen high school students from Germany are here for the next three weeks as part of an exchange program with the Council Rock School District that will immerse them in American culture and education.

“This is certainly going to change them in ways they could never have imagined,” said retired Council Rock German teacher Peg Thatcher, who accompanied the students on a walking tour of Newtown Borough on March 31. “They are going to experience something special – something they will keep with them forever.”

Their introduction to their home away from home began with an exploration of historic Newtown Borough with stops at the Court Inn (home of the Newtown Historical Association), the Newtown Borough Hall and The First National Bank & Trust Company.

Inside the Newtown Borough Hall, Mayor Charles “Corky” Swartz officially welcomed the students and presented them with a token of their visit here - a Newtown Borough pin. He spoke about local government and the unique building that houses the borough offices and council chambers.

Construction of the building, considered Greek Revival in style, began in 1857 - three years after the town was formally chartered as a borough - and was completed by 1858. Up until the 1940s, the building was used as both a council chambers and lock-up. Today the building houses the administrative offices of the borough.

He shared the story of the German stonemason who was hired to do the stonework for the new borough hall and jail and in a twist of irony ended up being the jail’s first occupant after he supposedly headed to one of the local drinking establishments after being paid, had a little too much to drink and on his way home stole several pigs.

The group also visited the Court Inn, the headquarters of the Newtown Historical Association, where they heard about the town’s rich and storied past from Dave Callahan.

Their final stop was The First National Bank of Newtown where Karen Dolton, the bank’s assistant marketing director, gave the students a glimpse inside the 150-year-old financial

institution, spoke about its past and about the bank's embrace of the latest in technology to provide additional conveniences to its customers.

The students, accompanied by three of their teachers, traveled here from the city of Ulm where they attend the Albert Einstein Gymnasium.

Located on the Danube River between Stuttgart and Munich in southern Germany, Ulm is the birthplace of Albert Einstein and is home to Ulm Minster, a Lutheran church boasting the tallest steeple in the world. Construction of the massive church began in 1377 when the foundation was laid. It was not completed until 1890.

Albert Einstein teacher Anka Brenjo described the exchange as "a big opportunity for them to get to know another culture, make new friends and speak English. It's also a good way to get to know the country personally - what people here are thinking and how they live - not just to pass by and take pictures like a tourist."

The students, who are staying with Council Rock host families while in the United States, will spend the majority of their time in the classroom and at school-related activities at Council Rock.

But they'll also have a chance to experience the big cities of New York and Philadelphia and the nation's capital, Washington, D.C.

"For them it's great. They're only 15 or 16. They haven't traveled much in their lives. So this is all so new and fascinating for them," said Brenjo.

"They're totally excited and enjoying themselves. Everybody is happy," she said. "I didn't expect that. I was worried that some might feel homesick and they might not like the food. But it's quite the opposite," she said. "Everything seems to be perfect so far."

Since Christmas, Brenjo said the students have been in contact with their host families via Skype and email. "They've been looking forward to this for a long time," she said.

Their Council Rock counterparts will complete the exchange by traveling to Ulm in July where they will be immersed in the German culture and language. Their stay coincides with the Albert Einstein Gymnasium's 40th anniversary celebration, which will include special activities centered around the school's milestone. "It's perfect timing," said Brenjo, who is accompanied on the trip by Albert Einstein teachers, Felix Worms and Silvie Rachold.

The teachers and students have Thatcher to thank for what will be the experience of a lifetime as their trip continues to unfold over the coming weeks.

While spending a year as an exchange teacher in Innsbruck, Austria, in the late 1970s Thatcher was inspired by the curiosity she found among the students about her school back in the states.

"I had some pictures that I showed them," she said of the school where she taught back at home - a building she described as "an old, old dilapidated school that I loved" with a library consisting of about 50 books, many of them covered in paper bags.

After seeing the photos, "one of the boys looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, 'I

would literally give my right arm if I could go to a school like this.”

After returning home, Thatcher worked for the next six years to convince the local school board to support a student exchange program. The rest, as they say, is history.

“I hope they go back with a very favorable impression of the United States,” said Thatcher of the German exchange students who are now experiencing life in Bucks County. “I hope they learn a lot of English. And I hope while they are here they give the folks they come in contact with an excellent idea of how great young people are from Germany. We have more similarities than we have differences,” she said.

“And I hope the reverse for their Council Rock counterparts,” Thatcher continued. “I hope they come home with an increased knowledge of Germany, an increased knowledge of the German people and they get to see their own country through other people’s eyes. It will broaden their horizons. It will certainly change them,” she said.

According to Thatcher, the exchange has been taking place annually since the early 1980s. The first few years of the exchange was with the German cities of Göttingen and Freiburg before the program connected with Ulm, an association that continues to today.

Over the years, the bond between Ulm and Newtown has become so strong, in fact, that the Mayor of Ulm recently wrote a personal letter to the Council Rock School District voicing strong support for the German foreign language program.

“German is the language of science, medicine, great literature, great philosophy,” said Thatcher. “It’s also a great discipline. It teaches people logic. It’s really important that the language” continues to be offered as part of a Council Rock education, she said.

And the exchange program is a big part of that education, said Thatcher, offering students a real word experience where they can put to use the foreign language skills learned in the classroom.

The exchange also leads to long-lasting relationships, an exchange of cultural ideas and mutual understanding, adds Thatcher.

“Frequently these families become lifelong friends. I know from experience that many of these exchanges have lasting impacts. One of them turned into a marriage,” she said.

“I know former students who are still in contact and close friends with their exchange partners. They’ve kept up with each other’s families,” Thatcher continued.

“It’s been wonderful. Just wonderful,” she said.

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