

Verona Area School District

To Germany and back: VAHS students make lasting connections in Europe

Students in German classes spend two weeks with sister school in Borgsolms

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Staff Reporter

In 2009, the Verona Area High School began an exchange partnership with the school Gesamtschule Solms in Burgsolms, Germany. That fall, a group of German students arrived in Wisconsin to stay with their host partners from VAHS German classes for the first time.

Now, fourteen years later, the partnership between two high schools that stand over 4,000 miles apart continues to grow and create lasting connections between students from different cultures across the world.

Karen Diemer-Toney, the VAHS German teacher, said students receive their exchange pairings a year in advance. Typically, students from Germany arrive in Verona during late September or October. Then, nearly every two years, a group of students from Verona get the chance to travel to Germany themselves.

It's been a while since VAHS students traveled to Germany, Diemer-Toney said. This year, however, a group of 16 students packed their bags – flying nearly nine hours to stay with host partners in Burgsolms and surrounding villages for two weeks from March 18 until April 1.

Following the trip, the Press sat down with six seniors in Diemer-Toney's German V class to discuss their experience getting to know and learn alongside students at Gesamtschule Solms.

Experiencing a new culture

When reflecting on his time in Germany, Michael Schleeper noted something Diemer-Toney told students.

"It's like you're an animal in a zoo there because everyone is staring at all these Americans," he said. "It was a little much at first, but you kind of get used to it and then it's kinda fun because they just want to hear all about America and how much you know about German culture."

Schleeper said he enjoyed talking with kids at Gesamtschule Solms – which included students in grades 6-10 – and learning about their life compared to life in America.

In terms of the school itself, Hilary Blomberg said Germany was very different from VAHS. Rather than having their own room, teachers moved to the students.

"It seemed more college-like," she said. "Their schedules were the same every week, but they just didn't have as much say in what they got to take for a class – it was kind of dictated for them."

Since classes were taught entirely in German, Lily Frye said it was challenging – especially at first – to



Photos submitted

Above: The exchange program between VAHS and Gesamtschule Solms began in 2009, with the first group of German students arriving in Wisconsin that fall.

Left: Verona Area High School's sister school is Gesamtschule Solms in Burgsolms. Students stayed in Burgsolms and surrounding villages for two weeks.

understand.

"So, you had to really focus on what people were saying to understand – versus here you can just kind of zone out and still hear what's going on, understand what's going on," she said. "But if you stopped paying attention for a second, you'd get behind and would miss a whole bit of context."

While classes were taught in German, Blomberg said students had been learning English for a long time. During an English class, she couldn't believe how well the students were at speaking English.

Blomberg never had an issue talking to anyone at the school in English, she said, and found they held conversations "perfectly fine."

"I was amazed – this isn't even their language and they're writing complex sentences," she said. "They can say they're bad at it, but they really weren't."

Goodwin Hawks found that language is much more emphasized in Germany, specifically because of how close the different countries are. He said most of their partners spoke at least three different languages.

"I think that was really cool to see, too – how much they care about learning a bunch of different languages and

getting good at it," he said.

Outside of school, Gabrielle Otremba found one of the biggest differences between Wisconsin and Germany in transportation. She said the roads are much smaller, and it's not as common for people to drive, instead opting for the bus, train or a walk.

"It was really weird getting used to having to figure out how I need to get somewhere, because (here) I can just get in my car and go somewhere, but there it's just a lot more steps," she said.

In general, Blomberg said the communities felt more connected. She liked seeing how interactions differed in a new country, whether the students were visiting sister school Gesamtschule Solms or stopping at a store.

"I just feel like everyone knew each other – at least in their little village – and they'd just go to someone's house and eat cake and talk," she said. "Everyone in the neighborhood pretty much knew that we were the exchange students just because they knew who my partner was, and they knew we were coming."

Making lasting connections

Diemer-Toney said that

while she could take students to Europe and visit a bunch of cool tourist sites, that's really only creating "a memory." By pairing VAHS students up with a student from Germany, however, students get the opportunity to make connections that can last a lifetime.

Once students receive their pairings, Diemer-Toney said they often reach out via social media. Yet, it's once students physically arrive in Verona from Germany that the connections grow really quickly.

Through these partnerships, Diemer-Toney said students often share the intention of traveling again someday.

Blomberg stays in touch with her German partner frequently, noting they text all the time through social media.

"We're still planning future plans (for when) she comes here and we go back," she said. "All of us still want to go back together and they still want to come back here. She even wants to bring her brother with this time."

"I met some of her friends and now I have more friends from Germany," she added. "We're all in touch with our German friends and it's really cool."

In addition to building new relationships, some students also got the chance to connect

with their own family at a deeper level.

Frye said her great-grandmother, who is now 90-years-old, was born and raised in Germany during World War II. While visiting Europe for the first time, Frye's host family took her to see the house her great-grandmother grew up in.

"The house that my great-great-grandfather built was in this town (that) was like 15 minutes away from where we stayed and we actually went there a lot," Frye said. "My host family took me to the house that my great-great-grandfather built and that my great-grandmother lived in, so I got to see that which was an amazing experience."

Diemer-Toney noted that while in high school, she was touched by her own exchange experience. In fact, it was one

of the big reasons why she continued to learn German and eventually became a German teacher.

Now, Diemer-Toney can offer her students a similar experience at VAHS.

"As much alike as Germany and Wisconsin (are), there are a lot of differences – and I think we can learn a lot from each other," she said. "I think we can learn a lot from Germany about maybe taking more bus transportation or walking or biking instead of just automatically getting into our car. I think there's just a lot we can learn, and I think there's a lot they can learn from us as well."

"There's just so much value in this type of exchange," she added.

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