

German exchange program marks 30 years

Two high schools send 15 to 20 language students for a 2-week stay in another culture

By Kathy Samudovsky

MT. LEBANON SCHOOLS

Years from now, when seniors Alexa Rhodes and Alec West reminisce about their high school days, memories will include views of German castles and the taste of homemade schnitzel.

That's because the 17-year-olds are among nearly 500 students who, since 1983, have participated in the German-American Student Exchange Program at Mt. Lebanon High School.

This year marks the program's 30th anniversary of exchanges with the same high school in central Germany — Stittisches Gymnasium in the city of Duren, in the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen.

"It's a true exchange program," said Christian Stein, a German language teacher at Mt. Lebanon. "It gives language students in both countries a real-life cultural experience that

they would not otherwise have, by living day to day with a host family. They're pretty much immersed in the language and culture."

Mt. Lebanon's exchange program is different from those at other local high schools, where, typically, students stay at hotels and travel with English-speaking guides, Mr. Stein said.

It's also highly unusual to have a three-decades-long relationship with the same school in another country, he said.

Mr. Stein co-chairs the Mt. Lebanon program with German language teacher colleague Peg Meyers.

For liability reasons, the exchange program is not sponsored by the high school nor is it part of the curriculum, Mr. Stein said. It is an outgrowth of the high school's German lan-

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guage program, with students paying their trip expenses.

The program started at Mt. Lebanon by a twist of fate, according to Mr. Stein. In the fall of 1983, a Connecticut high school that was scheduled to host an exchange program with Stittisches Gymnasium through the German-American Fulbright Commission, canceled two weeks before students were to arrive. The commission con-

tacted Sheldon Campbell, who was Mt. Lebanon High School's foreign language supervisor at the time and who had previously expressed interest in the program. Mr. Campbell quickly arranged for host families, and the program has since flourished.

Each spring and fall, the two high schools exchange 15 to 20 language students for a two-week stay, accompanied by two teachers. In June, Mt. Lebanon students who are studying German stay with host families of Stittisches Gymnasium students who are studying English. The program started at Mt. Lebanon by a twist of fate, according to Mr. Stein. In the fall of 1983, a Connecticut high school that was scheduled to host an exchange program with Stittisches Gymnasium through the German-American Fulbright Commission, canceled two weeks before students were to arrive. The commission con-

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man student. We talk on Skype all the time just to share funny things or ask about things that are happening in each other's countries," Alec said.

This year, students from Germany visited Mt. Lebanon from Oct. 8-21. In honor of the program's 30th year, Stittisches Gymnasium teacher Gabriele Broecker, who accompanied German students during the first exchange year, came to visit, too.

The German visitors attended Mt. Lebanon's homecoming festivities and were taken to Carnegie Mellon University, the Strip District, Heinz Field and Grove City's Amish community, among other places, Mr. Stein said.

The program requires that students from both countries attend school with their host students for three days; they spend the remainder of time as they wish, with one exception. For three days and two nights,

the teachers take their own students on sightseeing excursions to give host families a break, Mr. Stein said.

Last month, the teachers from Germany took their students to visit Washington, D.C. Last spring, Mr. Stein and Ms. Meyers took the Mt. Lebanon students to Hamburg, Munich, Dresden and other locations. They also toured the city of Aachen, near the Belgian border, which hosts some of the oldest remnants of the Roman empire in Europe, Mr. Stein said.

"It was a wonderful experience," Alexa said. "Through it, I fell in love with Germany and re-fell in love with Pittsburgh as I got to show the German students around. It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

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