

Community Word

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Youth Exchange To Freidrichshafen

by Gregory Speck

Brittany Servis, a high school senior, relates, "I was a high school freshman in a German class, and my teacher told me about a program where students can sign up to be part of a sister city with Peoria." She said that she thought it would be fun and something new for her to do. "My first impression was that it would be me flying out by myself to meet up with a random family that knew almost nothing about Americans and I would have to basically fend for myself, almost like a tourist, but I was surely not right," exclaimed Servis.

According to their website: www.peoriasistercity.org, the Sister City Youth Exchange between Peoria and Freidrichshafen, Germany first occurred in 1980. "Ours is the longest continuous running youth exchange between sister cities anywhere in the United States," says Eric Hoadley, Youth Exchange Program Coordinator for Friends of Freidrichshafen. He says that their program is not like a tour group where you travel on a bus to different locations, disembark, do some sight seeing and then proceed to the next attraction, or landmark. Hoadley explains that the twenty teenagers who come to this sister city actually live with a host family and

actually participates in their daily life - for a period of three weeks. There is a host teenager, who is paired with an American counterpart, who is of the same age and gender.

Hoadley said, "The youth exchange program is self-supporting. According to him, "The organization, Friends of Friedrichshafen, is a non profit agency in which no one receives a salary. All of the officers are volunteers. The youth are responsible for their own transportation, which makes up 90% of the program's costs. The students also bring their own spending money for items that they wish to purchase." The Sister City in Freidrichshafen, Friends of Peoria, pay for all of the entry fees for museums, etc. This year's youth exchange will be July 24- August 14.

Theresa Hoadley, also a Friends of Freidrichshafen Youth Exchange Coordinator, said of the trip's costs: "The trip may seem costly but its worth is priceless. Not only do the American students see a different land and culture, they also become part of it...sort of experiencing another culture from the inside."

Mike Quine, who is Chairman of the Sister City Commission, relates that Peoria's

Sister City relationship with Freidrichshafen began in 1976 as a people-to-people and culture-to-culture exchange. He explained, "Freidrichshafen has the largest Caterpillar dealer, which controls all of Europe. The mayor of Freidrichshafen is also President of Caterpillar there. There are two other sister city relationships in Peoria," said Quine. One sister city is Clonmel, Ireland, and the other one is Benxi (pronounced benchi), China. Both are culturally oriented to adults."

Quine said that President Eisenhower came up with the idea of having sister city exchanges between countries. He said, "If you get to know each other, you might not go to war." There are 1,000 sister city relationships between the United States and other countries, according to Quine. He stressed that the goal of the Sister City Commission is to create a Peoria which is more cosmopolitan, hospitable and friendly from the top on down to their sister cities.

The youth who come here enjoy the cultural opportunities here, as well as Chicago. They appreciate the different architectural structures, said the chairman. He mentioned that he receives and sends email back and forth to the people of their sister city. There are art exhibits that move back and forth between the two cities. Quine stressed, "Great friend-

ships are formed."

Hoadley said of Europe, "The flavor of Europe is totally different. You can almost sense it in the air. While the houses are ordinary, some walls are three feet thick. The city possesses Gothic architecture." He further explained, "The history of Europe's buildings lends to its cosmopolitan nature. While some of our buildings may be a hundred years old, theirs have existed for several centuries." Hoadley drew attention to how close are the European cities and countries. He stated that this compactness lends itself to its other worldly character.

Servis stressed, "It is a little hard to adjust to the surroundings of Germany. I mean, most of our cities are full of tall buildings and everyone is in a hurry. It wasn't the same at all there. They seemed more relaxed about everything, and were very friendly. Also, the food is very different than ours; it took some time to adjust to as well."

Theresa Hoadley, also a Youth Program Exchange Coordinator spoke about the environment of Germany. "Germany is breathtaking; from the snow-capped mountains to beautiful lakes and rivers to the wonderful chocolates that melt in your mouth. The people are so hospitable. They treated us like family and tried to feed us until we burst."

E. Hoadley stated that he

was surprised by the reasons parents give for not sending their youth to Freidrichshafen:

1) It is too far. 2) Germany and the United States have strong political disagreements over policies. E. Hoadley stated, "The political disagreements are politely broached; the people are very civil to their guests and do not allow political differences to become personal. It is very prestigious to host someone from here, and it is prestigious to host important U.S. officials. The Sister City Commission Director, Quine, underscored the one to one protocol that will exist between Mayor Jim Ardis, other city officials and their governmental Friedrichshafen counterparts, when they visit there this summer.

3) Parents are concerned about their teenager's safety. Hoadley stated, "The chaperones are always there to lead the teenagers through security. It is always possible to contact a chaperone if there is some crisis, even if they are visiting other parts of the city.

4) Language and communication between cultures is not a problem according to E. Hoadley. "Children learn about mandatory English from about age ten. They have at least four - nine years of study." He related that there was about a 50-50% chance that one of the host parents spoke either passably well or very good. The other spouse could need a translation

about what was being communicated in English. "The older generation usually do not speak English," he said.

T. Hoadley said of the language barriers; "Even though we did not speak the language, we were able to communicate. I frequently ventured off to the shops and had no difficulty making myself understood. All of us visiting from the U.S. made many friends. My philosophy is that when you open your eyes, ears and hearts to the people, you have no problem communicating."

5) The fifth reason parents give for not participating in the youth exchange program, is that they don't want to "disrupt" their personal/family schedules. E. Hoadley highlights, "The whole family benefits when you 'disrupt' set schedules when you travel or host as part of this program. Widened horizons, new perspectives, appreciation and understanding for those not like you...are things not taught often enough during the 'undisrupted' family schedules."

E. Hoadley "There is a life change, a maturation of three years in three weeks. Teenagers maybe timid, unsure of situations in their sister city, but they became more sure of themselves after a period of time. They had fun learning about another culture; first, from living with and participating in their host family's life and from attending the Friends of Peoria Sister City arranged events." He mentioned that some of these were held with the host families, such as, parties and picnics. Other events were more organized, such as a day trip to Munich, or a cable car ride to the Austrian Alps. Many other events were informally planned between the host teenager and their American counterpart; such as gatherings with the host teenager's friends.

Hoadley stressed, "Their sister city's culture, while being different, was not as different as their expectations first led them to believe." For more information about youth exchange signup deadlines, contact Eric or Theresa Hoadley at (309)266-6820, or visit (www.peoriasistercity.com)



A group of German and American teens, taken along Friedrichshafen's picturesque harbor. Approximately eight official events gather all US and German students together during the three-week visit, but it is also common for small groups of students to be seen exploring the city and surrounding area independently.



James Saizman (left) of Washington and Mark Jones of Eureka pose in Munich, a favorite daytrip that's always part of the program in Germany. The German and American teens, along with chaperones, ride the German train system to Munich, then split into smaller, individual groups to explore the capital of Bavaria.