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German students find surprises in U.S.

By Steve Earley , Freeman staff



German teacher Dietmar Vogler sits with, from left, students Paul Knipper, Kerstin Knapp and Heidi Walter.

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BOICEVILLE - They were surprised by the large portions served by American restaurants and a bit overwhelmed by the security in public places, but a group of German high school students who recently visited the United States as part of an exchange program at Onteora High School said overall they felt incredibly welcomed by their hosts.

"People in general in America are really open," said 17-year-old Manuel Beck, who, like many of his classmates, was on his first trip to the United States. "They say 'hi' and ask you how you are and what life is like in Germany. They're not afraid to ask questions"

Beck was one of 22 11th-graders from the Hegau-Gymnasium school in Singen, Germany, a city about twice the size of Kingston, to meet with German classes at Onteora this week during a 18-day trip that also included visits to Albany, Hyde Park, New York City and Washington, D.C.

The 22 Onteora students who served as their hosts will visit Germany in July.

The German students, who also had the chance to sit in on classes not typically offered in German high schools, such as photography and criminal justice, said they found students here enjoyed less formal relationships with teachers.

"School is not so strict as in Germany," said Heidi Walter, 16. "I think it's a lot more fun."

Walter and most of her peers spoke nearly flawless English, which is taught in German schools beginning between fifth grade and seventh grade.

The role of nationalism and religion in society were among some of the more striking differences the students observed between American and German cultures.

Paul Knipper, 16, an avid mountain biker who says he plans to return to United States to visit the West coast, said nothing like American students' daily pledge of allegiance to the flag exists in Germany, where he said it's rare to even have a flag in the classroom.

Religious instruction, generally absent from American public high schools, is a staple in Germany, where students can choose between Catholic and Protestant classes, both of which include lessons about other world religions.

"If you're not Catholic or Protestant or you don't believe in God, you can go to ethics," Beck said.

Knipper said mixing of religion and politics, however, is frowned upon in Germany,

"If Mr. Bush is making a speech his last line is always, 'God bless America,'" he said. "Our government doesn't do anything like that."

Public health laws in the two countries also sharply differ.

Dietmas Vogles, one of three teachers traveling with the exchange students, said many American students are shocked to learn that German teenagers can legally drink beer at age 16. He said Germans are equally surprised at the crackdown on cigarette smoking here.

"In Germany smoking is allowed by the students in areas around the school. It's impossible here," said Vogles, who added that all of his students are non-smokers.

The exchange students, who will fly back to Germany Tuesday after three days in Washington, D.C., will take with them plenty of the typical souvenirs, such as jeans and "I Love New York" T-shirts, as well as some more unusual ones.

Beck said he's developed a taste for American pop-punk bands such as Sugarcult and Matchbox Romance, groups he said he's never heard in Germany.

And Vogles said students have dozens of new pen pals.

"Lots of e-mail addresses have been exchanged," he said.

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