

Sparta middle school students build connections with French peers

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SPARTA — Less than 72 hours after touching down on American soil, Cyrille Grember, 14, was circling the bases in a coup de circuit.

That's French for "home run," one of several morsels of American vernacular the youngster spent Sunday mastering during a potluck picnic at Station Park attended by 35 French teenagers and their host families from Sparta.

The crisp autumn weather and clear skies proved a fitting backdrop for the event as the visitors were introduced by their American counterparts to other terms such as hot dogs, baked beans, tacos and cupcakes — there are no cupcakes in France — followed by a hearty game of Wiffle Ball and, later, a pickup game of American-style football.

Doug Crouse, a French teacher at Sparta Middle School, said the weeklong visit not only is a chance for his students to deepen their love of the language and form meaningful friendships, but also to experience firsthand the doors that learning a language can open.

"Learning a language is not just a classroom exercise, but a tool to explore and understand the world more deeply," Crouse said, adding that peer-to-peer connections afford a natural path for that to occur.

Serge Wessels, who teaches French at Sparta High School, said being from France himself, he could empathize with the French visitors trying to acclimate themselves to American customs for the first time.

Not that their Sparta peers haven't been doing their best to make the adjustment go smoothly: From the time their visitors were greeted at Sparta Middle School late Thursday by host families waiting with signs welcoming them — in French — the Sparta community has thrown out the welcome mat and done its best to make their guests feel at home, Crouse said.

But for Jean-Romain Francis, 14, his first foray on American soil didn't exactly go swimmingly: Shortly after arriving Thursday at the British Airways terminal at JFK Airport, he learned his luggage had been lost. But he took it all in stride and, much to the relief of him and his host family, the luggage was located and returned to him the next day.

On Friday — their first full day here — the visitors were treated to a personalized tour of Yankee Stadium arranged by Sandy Polizzo, owner of Customized Student Tours in Newton, who is organizing the student exchange program for Sparta.

Saturday was an American-style family day as the French students enjoyed activities, from a trip to the Sparta High School football game to an American-style shopping day at the Rockaway Townsquare Mall.

For Jean-Romain and his hosts — Sebastian Gomez, 11, and Sebastian's parents, Andres and Lelia Gomez — Saturday offered a chance for them to partake in another uniquely American custom associated with autumn as they went pumpkin-picking. And later that day, Jean-Romain returned the favor as he cooked up chocolate sandcakes for his hosts.

For Lelia Gomez, having what amounts to a live-in chef from France stay with them for the week seems like a pretty good tradeoff.

"I'm keeping him," she joked, adding that Jean-Romain's company so far has been a delight for her family. "He's very talkative and very interested in everything — politics, history, you name it," she said, adding that Jean-Romain's nickname among his peers is "Wikipedia."

Being from Ecuador herself — her husband, she said, is from Colombia — Gomez said "we can also understand what he's going through" as he makes the adjustment to a new culture.

Stephane Doumbe, of Sparta, said that having been born in Paris and grown up in France himself, he, too, could relate. But seeing his son Ethan, 11, find common ground with their French guest, Leo Coulomb, 13, has been rewarding all the way around.

"I think, too, the excitement of being in the U.S. and doing and sharing all that with their own friends will be something they'll remember," he said.

In addition to touring other sites this week including the Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn Bridge and 9/11 Memorial in New York City, the French students will spend a couple of days this week shadowing their American counterparts and giving presentations at Sparta Middle School and Sparta High School before boarding their Oct. 18 return flight to France.

"Most of the teachers have requested presentations on life as a French teenager," Crouse said.

This year's exchange program, Crouse added, is the first one he could recall being held in Sparta. A chance meeting with Polizzo through an exchange program she organized previously with Kittatinny Regional High School turned out to be the impetus for putting together a similar one this year in Sparta.

"She asked if we'd be interested, and I said yes," Crouse said.

Laurence Guignard, an English teacher at the College St. Louis — the school attended by the French exchange students — said this is her second time visiting the United States, having previously visited as a chaperone during a 2011 exchange program coordinated with Kittatinny.

As an English teacher, she noted, too, that a challenge for some of the French students involved making the transition from the British English taught in France to American English and its distinctive vernacular and pronunciations. She recalled, in a lighter moment, how during a prepared speech she gave to the Kittatinny community in 2011 at the conclusion of that year's program, "I tried really hard to speak with an American accent and was told afterward how wonderful my British English was," she joked.

In the meantime, said Crouse, "the hope is that this will become an annual event." He said he and the teachers visiting from France plan to start an email exchange between their respective students, adding that "our hope is that they'll get to meet in person here in Sparta in October 2014."

Yacinthe Garcia, who teaches Spanish at College St. Louis and is also serving as a chaperone for the visiting French students, shares that sentiment.

"This is my first time in the U.S., but it won't be my last," he said.

The original story incorrectly identified the school where French teacher Serge Wessels teaches. The error has been corrected.



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