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Forging friendships from Germany to Peoria

By Sonya Coehlo

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The Germans are coming. But, it is not an invasion. Instead it is the Friends of Friedrichschafen 2009 youth exchange program.

The group is looking for American families interested in hosting German teenagers during the summer.

FOF is a Peoria-based private, non-profit organization that helps the city's Sister City Commission promote and expand its relationship with Friedrichschafen, a town on the northern side of Lake Constance and the birthplace of the zeppelin.

According to Eric Hoadley, publicity chair of FOF's Youth Exchange program, Peoria's sister city relationship with Friedrichschafen began in 1976 with the work of mayor Richard Carver.

What started out as a business relationship — the German town is home to one of Caterpillar Inc.'s largest dealerships — over the years developed cultural and educational undertones.

For example, the Peoria Symphony Orchestra performed there, and Bradley

University has a tie-in with the local university for an advanced program in thermodynamics.

Hoadley and his wife, Theresa, are also the coordinators for the program.

"The Youth Exchange program was established in 1978," said Hoadley. "And, I do believe that in the U.S., it's the longest and uninterrupted youth exchange program."

Every other year, both cities take turns hosting 20 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19 for three weeks in the summer. This year, it is Peoria's turn to host 20 German students and their chaperones.

Hoadley said what sets this effort apart from other similar programs is that students are offered free board and lodging for the entire duration of their stay in Friedrichschafen or Peoria. That means aside from airfare and spending money, costs are limited.

Travel is limited to Friedrichschafen and the neighboring areas, giving participants a more intensive German experience. Students take part in the life and activities of their host families. They join in local events,

while group functions bring the whole entourage together.

Jennifer Leet and Alexander Nerz forged a friendship through the program. Leet, 17, a senior at Peoria Notre Dame, spent time at Friedrichschafen as part of the youth exchange program, and now her family is hosting Nerz, who is here working as a sort of ambassador for the program.

"I found Germany to be pretty disciplined and organized," Leet said. "Houses and buildings are not as spread out as they are in the United States. So, it's easy to walk and bike your way around. That's good for health, and I liked that."

Leet said she enjoyed the experience, especially as it was her first trip overseas.

Now, the travel bug has bitten her, and she is keen to see other places, the Caribbean and England being her top spots.

Nerz first came to the U.S. with his parents at the age of 3. "We stayed for three years and then returned to Germany," he said.

He returned as a teenager as part of the youth exchange

program in 2007. This time, those first impressions crystallized into something more definitive.

"In Germany, partying and clubbing start at a very early age, so does the relationship with beer and alcohol," he explained. "In the U.S., at high school level, you can have a good time without indulging in alcohol."

While family life is quite similar, he does point out that in Germany, the main meal of the day is lunch. He said he is also fascinated by America's obsession with gizmos.

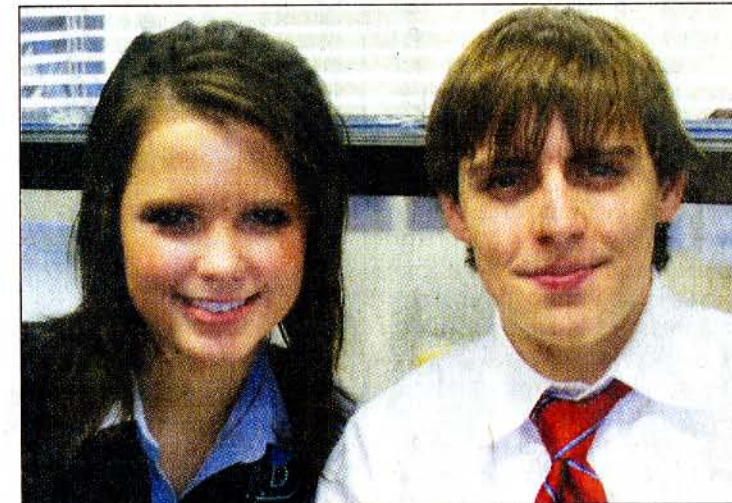
"Everyone here has a Playstation, iPod, cell phone," he said smiling.

"In Germany and much of Europe, electronics are very expensive, and hence not in common reach."

Nerz is attending Peoria Notre Dame and offered his insights.

"I find the U.S. system a bit stressful compared to Germany, as there are very few breaks here. In Germany, we have many holidays, which helps us to re-charge," he said.

"The school system in Germany is more structured. You sit in your classroom and your



Friends: Jennifer Leet, a Peoria Notre Dame student, poses with exchange student Alexander Nerz, also attending Peoria Notre Dame.

teachers come to you. This makes it easier to know other students. In the U.S., you have to keep moving around for your classes."

Students have an opportunity to gain insights, Hoadley said, because of the kind of activities the program offers.

For visiting German students, their itinerary includes a trip to Chicago, because skyscrapers are not the norm in Europe, a baseball game, paint ball, a trip to Lakeview Museum and cookouts, among

other events.

U.S. students visit Munich, trek to the Austrian Alps, visit the Zeppelin Museum (the zeppelin is Friedrichschafen's civic identity), do a bit of canoeing and other outdoor activities.

So, how does FOF finance itself?

"Most of it comes from memberships," Hoadley said. "Last year, we celebrated FOF's 30th anniversary and received substantial city and corporate support."