

Germans don work gloves to say thanks

Service project is one way to thank community for its hospitality

BY CATHARINE SCHAILDE
OF THE JOURNAL STAR

PEORIA — It's been 29 years since the first youth exchange between Peoria and Friedrichshafen, Germany, in 1978, but it remains exciting for participants on both sides of the sister city program.

Over the weekend, the 20 German guests, their host siblings and chaperones did something different. Instead of being entertained, like they have for the past three weeks, they put on gloves, and took up brooms and garbage cans and set out to do some serious work.

"This is not really fun, but it's good to help," was the candid assessment of Alexander Nerz, 15, of Friedrichshafen as he pulled weeds from the parking lot of Family House, where the service project was carried out. "We did a lot of fun things now we can do a little work."

Nerz's hosts are Cal and Sally Masear of Washington.

Nicole Fischer, 17, a guest of Steve and Lisa Horn of Morton, said she was willing to do some work after all the fun she's had.

"Yesterday we had a beach party on Bloomington Lake, so now we do this. It's OK," she said.

Organizers felt it was time they thanked the community that has given so many kids such a positive experience, said Eric Hoadley, member of Friends of Friedrichshafen and coordinator of the youth exchange.

"The local community goes all out to make sure these kids have good experiences," he said.

Every year, about 20 teenagers ages 14 to 19 from one country visit the other for three weeks in the summer. The following year, they switch. When it's Peoria's turn to host, guests are taken to the Lakeview Museum, a Peoria Chiefs game, Peoria City Hall and a beach



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Alexander Nerz of Friedrichshafen, Germany, pulls weeds during a service project at Family House on Saturday. About 20 youth and their chaperones are visiting Peoria under the sister city youth exchange program. Alexander is staying with Cal and Sally Masear of Washington.

party in Bloomington.

And that's in addition to what the host families plan for their guests.

Finding host families is sometimes a problem because people think communication will be an issue.

"English is a requirement in their schools from about the age of 10, so they have at least four years of it before they come here," Hoadley said.

The shortage of host families is the reason Leslie Paulson and Steve Pierz hosted two German students from Friedrichshafen.

"They don't really like to have more than one with a host family, but they were a bit short this year," Paulson said. "They usually try to match the kids by age and gender."

Christian Hesse, 16, and

Jonas Roleder, 15, are the same ages as Paulson and Pierz's sons, Matthew, 16, and Ian, 15. They also have a 12-year-old, Albert and a 6-month-old, Rita.

There was no language barrier at all, Paulson said.

"We take it for granted, and even when we send our kids over there, they are not expected to speak in German," she said.

Jonas said contrary to the German portrayal of Americans on wild West TV shows, he found that "Americans are nice and open to new things and they explain new things to us."

Matthew Pierz said he planned to keep an open mind about his guests, but they've had nothing but fun together.

"They're great. I didn't expect them to be able to play Magic, an old card game, but

Christian beat me every time and I only won when he let me beat him," he said.

Matthew is looking forward to visiting Germany next year.

Iris Seliger came to Peoria in 2004 as a chaperone and returned again this year with her 17-year-old daughter Ellen, and about 10 others from Friedrichshafen. She and her husband, Joachim, are members of the Peoria Club back home and are strong supporters of the exchange program.

"It's a very good program," she said.

The visitors will return home Aug. 16.

To learn more about the youth exchange program, log on to www.peoriasistercity.org/youthexchange.html.

Catharine Schaidle can be reached at 686-3290 or cschaidle@pjstar.com.