

French connections: Foreign students visit Bristol's war monuments

BRISTOL — French students toured Memorial Boulevard and met with local veterans Wednesday.

A stroll down Memorial Boulevard served as a lively tour of American history for a group of teenagers visiting from France this week.

Bristol Central High School has an ongoing partnership with the village of La Queue lez Yvelines, located about 40 minutes outside of Paris, in which French students come here and Bristol students travel there in alternate years.



Currently 17 students are spending two weeks living with area families, visiting at BCHS and learning about the city.

Tim Gamache, a member of the Bristol Veterans Council, said the students visited the boulevard Wednesday and received a history lesson from a group of local veterans who talked about their own experiences and memories of each war recognized by Bristol's noted monuments.

Patti Mielniczuk and Reggie Michaud were stationed on the north side of the boulevard, handling the Tribute Walkway and the No Conflict Left Unhonored stones. Across the road, Willie Lavoie and Omer Deabay handled a presentation on the Korean War monument.

Gamache and Ed Litherland addressed the students at the Vietnam, World War II, Civil War Memorial and Revolutionary War monuments. The tour finished up at the World War I monument where Marine veteran, Press columnist and town historian Bob Montgomery gave a talk.

Mielniczuk and Michaud are all American Legion Post 2 members. LaVoie and Deabay are Korean War Veterans Association members. Gamache is a member of both organizations. Litherland is part of the Bristol Community Emergency Response Team.

The visitors were given a basic overview of what each monument represents, said Gamache, who has interacted with French students three times prior. "I usually quiz them on what Vietnam was called before it was Vietnam. They know it was Indochina but they never know it was French Indochina. They probably just refer to it as Indochina there."

"I tell them when I first start if I'm going too fast then slow me down, but they all seem to be very fluent in English," he said. "They're pretty shy, so I ask them questions just to get them engaged. They're all honor students, very smart kids."

The French teens are also very polite and respectful, he said. "They express their appreciation for the time you spend with them, and they're very much a joy to be around. I always look forward to doing this."

"It didn't hurt that I sang the praises of France when we got to the Revolutionary War either," he added. "They liked that and they knew who the Frenchman was who helped to end the war at Yorktown. I was surprised, they actually knew it was Lafayette."

Gamache said the students were fairly knowledgeable about the two world wars and the Vietnam conflict.

"I tripped them up a little bit when I asked them when World War II started. They said 1939, which for them is correct. I asked them 'when do you think America actually got involved?'"

They weren't quite up to speed on Pearl Harbor and how we declared war the very next day," he said.

If you asked them about the European theater during WWII, they could give lots of answers, he said. "If you asked them about the Pacific theater they probably couldn't tell you diddly about that. It was the other side of the planet from France."

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