

French students revel in American flavor

BRISTOL — French students were fitting right in during their second to last day in the United States Tuesday, touring ESPN and meeting Mayor Ken Cockayne at City Hall. The students even made time for a lunch stop at West End Pizza.

The sense of familiarity may be no surprise. To Gaël Manescau, Bristol Central High School is a typical American school. In fact, the English teacher used the school as an example for a textbook in France.

The textbook has a two-page spread on Bristol Central, with pictures of football, the drama club and other programs. Those extracurricular activities don't exist at public schools in France, explained Dorothy Raviele, retired BCHS teacher.

Raviele founded an ongoing partnership between BCHS and 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.

Manescau and history teacher Corinne Mutter chaperoned the latest group of 17 students who just spent almost two weeks living with area families, learning about Bristol and traveling around the Northeast.

Cockayne talked to them about his role as mayor and how Bristol is the 11th largest city in Connecticut. He asked how large their hometown is in France.

"It's different small villages," Manescau replied.

Cockayne invited the students to sit at his desk and take pictures. The students were initially shy until one girl came forward for her chance and then they all wanted to do it.

Next they went to the Council Chambers, where Cockayne talked more about local government and showed them the photo portraits of all the mayors since the City of Bristol was founded. He presented the chaperones with keys to the city and memorial coins, showing the Bristol logo on one side and Muzzy Field on the other.

"Do they know about Babe Ruth and baseball?" he asked.

"Baseball is not their favorite sport," said Kelly Monahan-DiNoia, BCHS Latin teacher who also helped chaperone the group.

Mark Walerysiak, brand and marketing manager for the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, helped the students choose hats and T-shirts with the city's logo. And through it all students and teachers posed for, and took, lots and lots of photos.

Raviele and fellow language teacher Pat Rietze ran the Bristol end of the exchange program since it started in 2004. They both retired several years ago and now Anya Rochester leads the program, with the help of her fellow BCHS French teacher Teresa DiCarlo.

The current group of visitors consists of 13 girls and four boys between the ages of 15 and 16, Rochester said.

Since arriving March 4, they visited Yale University, Boston and New York City. In New York they toured the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, One World Trade Center and made an unscheduled stop at New York-Presbyterian Hospital.

One of the girls had a cold which turned into pneumonia, Manescau said. "She gasped for air. She couldn't breathe so we went to the ER."

The rest of the group went back to Bristol with the American teachers and the French chaperones spent 10 hours at the hospital, he said. "She is OK, so it is a good experience. My first time in the ER."

Monahan-DiNoia said for Tuesday night, their final night in the U.S., the adults would be having a farewell dinner at Cafe Buono and the students would have one last dinner with their host families.

"They've been with their families for 12 days and the families have just fallen in love with the French kids," she said.

Many of them will go on to have lifelong friendships, added Rochester. As for Manescau, who has been a chaperone for every trip to Bristol since 2004, he said he knows the city very well by now. "I love it," he said. "It's always a pleasure to be here."

The Bristol Press Susan Corica, Tuesday, March 15, 2016

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