

WITC Cultural Exchange Program Takes Off

By Jim Biros



Both WITC students and German visitors took a boat tour on the St. Croix River in Stillwater, Minn. German student Shiyanthi Shan, right, and WITC student Shauna Ruud.

During the past two years, an international flair has taken root at Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College. This fall, the college again opened its doors for exchange students and instructors from Germany.

From Sept. 23 to Oct. 5, six students and an instructor from the Julius Leber Schule visited WITC's Rice Lake campus, while five students and two instructors were at the New Richmond campus.

"The visit was well received," said Frank Braswell, academic dean of business. "The exchange students and faculty spent 14 days in combined WITC and community events. The students adjusted well to the

rural communities and enjoyed the hospitality of the Wisconsin residents. There was overwhelming consensus on how kind the American citizens are."

While visiting, the German students participated in several community events ranging from business and industry, health, government and foundation fund raising events. Shopping and Walmart were big hits with the conversion of their currency and the low U.S. prices on retail goods.

"The host families did an excellent job of showing the German students the area on the weekends and in the evening," says Mary Ann Pebler, divisional dean of allied health.

"They went to Lake Superior, local fall festivals, hiking in the Blue Hills, made pottery at a shop in Shell Lake and visited the Mall of America. Since the students were mostly in their late teens, they also enjoyed spending time with the teen-aged children of some of the host families."

The hard work of WITC staff and students led to an increase in visitors from Germany this year.

"In 2009 we had three students and two faculty members visit the campuses," says Braswell. "In 2010 the interest has grown to 11 students and three faculty members from two different German schools. This growth is due to the overwhelming positive experience of the 2009 visit."

This latest cultural exchange follows a trip taken last spring to Frankfurt, Germany, by six WITC students and two instructors.

"The ability to explore and learn about another culture's customs, norms and influences interested me," says WITC-Ashland student Shauna Ruud. "I was excited to see how their culture was different from the United States and incorporating what I've learned into my professional career."

The chance to travel to Europe may seem like an ideal vacation for some, but for WITC students taking part in the trip, much work and preparation was required before leaving.

"To prepare ourselves for the trip, we had meetings in person and via ITV," Ruud says. "We went over the paperwork that was required, what was expected of our behavior and the possibility of culture shock. We also had a couple guest speakers who came in – one was a foreign exchange student from Germany who taught us a few common German words and about



German instructors Hanne Hirn and Türkan Kanbicak played a great role in the successful stay WITC students had while visiting Germany.

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his country. The other guest speaker was a frequent traveler who talked to us about what to pack and expect as an American going abroad."

Living accommodations for the WITC students traveling to Frankfurt were

provided by the German students and instructors who visited WITC in the fall of 2009.

"My host family is my greatest memory," Ruud says. "They were amazing and very helpful throughout the entire visit."

Following the success of the Cultural Exchange Program and its ability to show students a world view as they prepare for their careers, hopes are high that the opportunity continues for WITC students.

"I think this is an important program that should be continued and grow," says Pebler. "The world is much 'smaller' these days due to the inter-connectedness via the Internet — especially for our younger students. Sharing cultural ideas and perspectives is a positive thing to do in the more global economy." ■



Julie Schaefer, left, Lenore Knock, Claudia Berggren, Hanne Hirn (German teacher), Isabelle Staudt (Shauna Ruud's host), Peter Staudt (Shauna Ruud's host parent), Shauna Ruud, Türkan Kanbicak (German Teacher) toured the Glaabsbrau Brewery.