

Manitoba-Germany Exchange celebrates 40th anniversary

By Nicolien Klassen-Wiebe

For the first time in the Manitoba-Germany Exchange's 40 years of existence, Canadian students will not be able to reunite with their exchange partners in Germany this spring, due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Manitoba-Germany Exchange (MGE) pairs up grade 11 students from Manitoba and Hamburg who take turns hosting each other in their homes for three months; the Germans come to Canada in fall and the Canadians go to Germany in spring.

Despite the crushing disappointment the travel restrictions have caused this year's group, the program is also celebrating its 40-year legacy of successful trips.

Karl Fast and Claus Hartwig established MGE in 1979. Fast was working as a language consultant in the Manitoba Department of Education, after founding and teaching at Westgate Mennonite Collegiate, and Hartwig was a representative of Germany for the same department.

Angela Neustaedter Wiebe was a Westgate student in the first exchange group that ran in 1979-80. As the granddaughter of Fast, "I'm not sure I actually got to decide," she laughs. But she's glad it happened that way—40 years later, she is still friends with her exchange partner Dorothee Bischoff.

Following their year together, the partners swapped letters and Christmas cards. When Bischoff's kids didn't make it into the exchange program, Neustaedter Wiebe and her husband hosted them. Over the years, she and Bischoff have visited each other on several occasions—in 2019, Bischoff attended the wedding of Neustaedter Wiebe's son.

MGE was handed over to the Manitoba Teachers of German in 1998, who have operated it on a volunteer basis ever since. In 2014, the program stopped partnering with the German state of Lower Saxony and proceeded solely with Hamburg, due to Lower Saxony's demand for a higher number of students than Manitoba could provide.

Around 830 Manitoban students and 850 German students have participated in the MGE since it began. Neustaedter Wiebe recognizes that not everyone stays in touch with their partners or even gets along with them. "I know not everyone's experience has been great. That's what happens when you mix people with people."

Gary Loewen, a Westgate alumnus and exchange participant in 1983, could not have been more different from his exchange partner, yet he still had a positive experience. "I'm in my mid-50s now and I still think back to that time as one of the best times in my life."

All three of Loewen and his wife Lolita's children attended River East Collegiate and participated in MGE. It's something they wanted their children to have the opportunity to do, not

only to connect with their Mennonite heritage and keep up the language of their grandparents, but to grow and learn about themselves.

“I feel very strongly that it helps develop teenagers’ self-identity and self-development, to live in another country with a different family and go to a different school,” says Charlotte Kroeker, chair of the Manitoba Teachers of German Exchange Committee for the last 13 years. Four others work with her on the committee. She also mentions the benefits of learning about another culture and seeing your own from a new perspective, as well as learning German in an immersive setting.

The program certainly opened up the world for Ryan Stoesz, who went in 2001 while at Westgate. It sparked his interest in German language and culture and led to more language classes and flights to Europe. He returned to Winnipeg just two months ago after spending six months working in a bakery in Hannover. His exchange partner, Jan Plewa, helped him make connections and find a place to live there.

The two have visited each other numerous times during their travels over the last two decades and attended each other’s weddings. Stoesz says within the first week of the exchange, they knew they wanted to be good friends. “I think that was the defining part of my experience.” The program showed him he could succeed outside of the bubble in which he grew up. He still considers his host family his German family.

Most Canadian students participating in the MGE now come from Westgate and River East Collegiate, with occasional students from other schools. Many more schools used to participate in the program when it started, including educational institutions in Winkler and Niverville, but most schools in Manitoba have since stopped offering German language classes.

“I think it’s a great experience for the kids . . . but also for us it was a great experience as parents,” says Lolita. “I’m hoping that the program will continue yet for a long time so we can keep that language going.”

Photo captions

Photo 1 – The 2018/19 Manitoba-Germany Exchange students from Manitoba head off to Germany for three months of living in their exchange partners’ homes.

Photo 2 – Gary and Lolita Loewen’s son, Alex (right) and his exchange partner Lorenz (left) at Pinawa Dam, Manitoba in 2015.

Photo 3 – Exchange partners Ryan Stoesz and Jan Plewa did the program in 2000/01 and have stayed in touch ever since.