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Students Pursue Research During International Exchange



Philip Simmonds, director of international relations for the Académie d'Amiens in France, with the Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellows Hayden Nunley, Tiffany Nguyen, Pearl Dang, and Annie Stephenson at the Rectorat in Amiens.

Last spring, four students from Oklahoma City traveled to France on a unique exchange program that asked them to do even more than experience the culture and develop their language skills. As the inaugural Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellows, the students investigated research questions of their choosing during a two-week stay in Amiens, France.

Pearl Dang, a student at Classen School of Advanced Studies in Oklahoma City, is an avid reader so she looked for a literary connection to Amiens. She found a short story by Jules Verne, *Une Ville Idéale*, which described the ideal city Amiens would become in 100 years. Her project compared the reality of modern Amiens with Verne's writing.

Annie Stephenson, a student at the Oklahoma School of Science and Mathematics, observed the teaching practices of math in France and compared them with those in the United States. Tiffany Nguyen, also of Classen School of Advanced Studies, compared the role of the Catholic Church in modern France and America, drawing upon conversations she had with a French student her family hosted and her involvement in her own church.

As a student at Westmoore High School, Hayden Nunley was already working on the Oklahoma Soldiers Project. Led by French teacher Madame Robillard, students research the stories of Oklahoma soldiers from World War II buried at the Normandy American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach. Because Amiens is in the Picardy region where many World War I battles were fought, Nunley instead chose to study a World War I soldier for both the Oklahoma Soldiers Project and the Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellows.

To be considered for the program, students had to be between the ages of 16 and 22 and attend a high school, career technology center, or community college in central Oklahoma. Applicants proposed a research topic related to Francophone language, history, or culture relevant to their studies or individual interest.

"We specifically looked for proposals in which the student had to go to France to conduct the research, instead of just using the Internet. That is a novel concept for today's high school students," explains Jennifer Robinson, a French teacher at Classen School of Advanced Studies who traveled to France with the Fellows.

Eleanor Kirkpatrick founded the Alliance Française d'OKC (Oklahoma City), so her family foundation was a natural place to turn for funding. The Kirkpatrick Foundation provided a \$100,000 endowment for the program that pays the Fellows' airfare. Robinson is chair of the Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellows Committee for the Alliance Française d'OKC.

During their two-week stay in Amiens, the four Oklahoma students attended school in the morning and spent the rest of their time visiting with their host family and con-



Hayden Nunley, shown here at the entrance to an old military barricade near the Riqueval Bridge (site of the decisive WWI Battle of St. Quentin Canal), researched an Oklahoma soldier who fought in World War I and is buried in France.

ducting research. "They really had to take risks, conducting their research in Amiens, in talking with people and negotiating the language," says Robinson. "They had to interpret what they found and become experts on their subject."

Nunley's research didn't exactly go according to plan, at least not the plan he had envisioned back in Oklahoma. "I got to France and was slightly overwhelmed," he says. "I had expected my organizational skills to end up producing my project, but it ended up being everyday conversations with students and parents that gave birth to my project. Also, many resources from my host mom helped me immensely."

The Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco American Fellows is just one of many exchange programs and partnerships between the state of Oklahoma and Amiens. In 2007, the Oklahoma State Department of Education and the Academie d'Amiens, one of 26 educational districts in France, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to promote educational and cultural cooperation.

That alliance initiated more than 20 partnerships between schools in Amiens and Oklahoma that have gone far beyond traditional overseas exchanges. Today there is a culinary exchange program [highlighted in the April 2010 issue of *The Language Educator*], a K-20 teacher exchange program, and plans to start an immersion school with support from the Academie d'Amiens and Pueblo, Mexico.

Desa Dawson, director of world languages for the Oklahoma State Department of Education, helped draft the MOU and has been involved in establishing many of the follow-on partnerships. "We made so many connections from that initial alliance, and each time we meet with our French partners, more ideas come forward," she says. "The Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellows is one example of the innovative ideas that spring from face-to-face meetings."

After returning to Oklahoma, the students gave presentations on their research topic at the Alliance Française. Robinson



French students Elise Daire, Mélina Bourezma, Solenne Levesque, Lauriane Obame, Irène Dulac, and Adélaïde Calais traveled to Oklahoma to research topics like the civil rights movement, American perceptions of the French based on the media, national health care, and modern Native Americans.

says that despite having been on the trip, she learned more about the projects watching the students give their presentations.

About a week after the Oklahoma students returned home, six French students traveled to the state to conduct their own research projects. They were hosted by families of students at Classen Academy of Advanced Studies, where they attended class while doing research.

For an example of how hands-on the projects were, consider that of Irène Dulac, one of the French students, on the civil rights sit-ins in Oklahoma. She experienced living history at its best, interviewing Clara Luper and her children Marilyn and Calvin and the Reverend James Shields—all of whom participated in the sit-ins and showed Dulac sites of historical interest. She also interviewed Bruce Fisher, whose mother Ada Fisher broke the law school color barrier in 1949.

While in Amiens, Nunley found his Oklahoma soldier's grave at one of the battlefield sites and spoke with townspeople about their perception of American involvement in World War I. He found that the earlier war was greatly overshadowed by World War II.

"I learned an incredible amount about World War I and gained an immense appreciation for our soldiers who fought during the Great War," he added. "I would certainly recommend the program. It is slight culture shock and a major challenge, but the reward is amazing. I know I never could have envisioned the experience that I ended up having. It was worth all the hard work and stress. It's something I will never forget."

Dawson believes that the research project enabled the students to dig deeper, giving them a richer experience than a typical two-week homestay. "While in college, I spent a summer in Mexico. I benefited so much, but at the same time I was at loose ends much of the time, not sure what to do with myself. I more or less followed my host family's recommendations," she says. "In this program, the students had a specific question to investigate. Their stay in France and their study was very self-directed and I think that was empowering."

The reports from both the Oklahoma and French students can be found at the Alliance Française d'OKC website at afdokc.org.