

MILAN

Case study

Milan teacher takes part in 'Transatlantic Outreach'

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For Symons Elementary teacher Carolyn Wetzler, social studies offer more than a two-dimensional subject taught in school. It is a subject meant to break down prejudices, expand horizons, and appreciate the differences and commonalities of our world neighbors.

Recently, Wetzler was one of just 100 teachers in the country chosen to participate in the Transatlantic Outreach Program.

The fall of a major symbol of oppression—the Berlin Wall, was a major focus of the trip. The group of teachers learned about life behind the wall, and life after its demise.

"It was such an amazing experience," she smiled. "I was thoroughly impressed by the German people. To think that in our own life time we were witness to something as important as the fall of the Iron Curtain is just awe inspiring. Going there and hearing the people's personal stories and how they lived before and after—it was all extremely powerful. I want every teacher to be able to experience this."

EVERY YEAR, Wetzler attends the Michigan Council for Social Studies. About two years ago, a presentation on European travel got her excited.

"Social studies is learning about other peoples and their cultures," explained Wetzler. "Why we eat, celebrate, and speak the way we do is all influenced by culture. It is a fascinating subject. But experiencing other cultures is even better. When I heard about this European tour I knew I'd be something my students could benefit from. When I got the letter of notification I was delighted."

The experience did not disappoint her.

"The biggest thing I gained from this trip was a global perspective," said Wetzler. "We're so focused on our own stuff, our own country and culture that we forget about the world beyond our own borders."

A tour guide gave the group a firsthand account of the events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"It didn't just suddenly open up one day. It started with a small movement of quiet, peaceful demonstrations," she said. "Each Monday night a group of people would gather with lit candles and they would pray in front of the Stasi offices.



Recently, Carolyn Wetzler was one of just 100 teachers in the country chosen to participate in the Transatlantic Outreach Program, spending two weeks in Germany.

Stasi is German for 'secret police.' More and more people came each week until one night there were hundreds of thousands of people. Standing quietly with candles praying for an end to the oppression. That was the night the wall came down. The Germans call it the 'candle rebellion.'"

WETZLER WAS MOVED by the poignant stories of the resilient German people.

"Life behind the Iron Curtain was hard and if anyone spoke against the government they were taken by the Stasi for interrogations, imprisonment, torture—or sometimes they just disappeared and were never heard from again," Wetzler said. "It's hard to believe that in our own lifetime we've were a witness to an end of that kind of tyranny."

Wetzler noticed the recurring theme among all the stories of war and oppression was the quiet buoyancy of the people.

"Every single city we visited had been completely destroyed by bombs from World War II," Wetzler said.

"These people actually began planning for the rebuilding before the destruction occurred. There were stories of people going into these beautiful homes and libraries where they measured and wrote down all the details of each room

so that if it was destroyed they could rebuild. Stories of people taking priceless works of art and storing them in underground bunkers for safekeeping. They've completely rebuilt their entire country—it is quite impressive. They said they did it piece by piece. The women picked up rubble in the streets and rolled it away in trolley carts. Their resiliency is palpable."

BUT VISITING the places that survived the war was just as impressive. A tour of a 700-year-old castle in Heidelberg really got her thinking.

"I've been visiting historical places in America ever since I can remember. Everything I've seen is about 200 years old. To really stand in a castle that was built in the 1400s—I thought to myself—wow—we're still such a young country we don't really know what old is."

Occupying the same space where one of the world's most important composers created his music left her awestruck.

"I stood in the cathedral in Leipzig where Bach composed music, I have to say there were moments when the hair on my neck stood on end because it was so thrilling," she said.

While the trip was amazing, Wetzler is even more

excited about bringing her insights to her social studies classroom.

"I will start out by defining culture, then having them list things in that would be considered our own American culture," said Wetzler. "Here is southeastern Michigan we have so much German ancestry I'm sure we will see that we have been influenced by German culture."

Other trip highlights included a visit to a German high school.

"Their dress code was quite a bit different from

ours," she noted. "We would never allow our students to dress the way they do there—but at the same time, they're

level of civility is much different from ours. Courtesy and manners are extremely important in their culture. These kids were out at lunch with no adult supervision and they knew to clean up after themselves. It was quite impressive."

Wetzler indicated that overall the entire experience was amazing.

"I quickly made friends with another teacher on the trip. We had to keep asking each other, 'are we dreaming?' We kept pinching each other to make sure," she laughed. "We joked that our arms would be black and blue by the time we got back home!"