



Lernen German

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WESTWOOD

Let the other kids waste their Saturday mornings schlafen (sleeping) or fernsehen (watching TV). Tommy Crotser is busy lernen (learning).

Tommy, 4, who attends the German Language School of Westwood, spends his Saturdays immersing himself in the German language and culture.

No English is spoken in the classrooms or hallways. In order to pick up the language, it must be spoken exclusively, said Principal Barbara Lester.

On a recent Saturday, Tommy listened to his teacher read a story in German, played a game using German words and decorated Schultüten, cone-shaped goody bags that German schoolchildren traditionally receive on the first day of school.

His mother, Ellen Crotser of Westwood, sends her three children to German school because she fears they will lose their heritage in the American melting pot.

"I want them to learn the language I spoke growing up and the traditions of my family. I want to pass all that on to my children so it's part of their life too," she said.

For the Crotser children and others like them who grew up in New Jersey, the experience of studying the German language and traditions reinforces their cultural identity.

They don't seem to mind getting in touch with their roots. "It's fun," said Tommy.

The German school - which is celebrating 40 years of German instruction this year - isn't all memorizing words and conjugating verbs. It's also about celebrating a culture.

The school celebrates holidays such as the Fasching (Feb. 4, dressing in costumes and participating in a carnival), St.

Martin's Day (Nov. 4, making paper lanterns and parading with them through the streets at twilight singing German songs to praise the saint's generosity), and St. Nikolas Tag (Dec. 3, the arrival of St. Nikolas, who distributes treats to students).

This Saturday the school will observe German Day, commemorating the reunification of Germany on Oct. 3, 1990. They will also celebrate the month of friendship between America and Germany, declared in October 1987 by former President Ronald Reagan.

Students and parents will partake in a feast of German delicacies, including an array of wurst (sausages), sauerkraut, potato salads, breads and traditional desserts.

Such programs foster a sense of community by creating a meeting place and celebration destination for families of similar backgrounds who are dispersed across the state.

For Crotser it offers a sense of belonging. While her children are at the two-hour classes, she enjoys the camaraderie of other adults who come from similar backgrounds. "We all hang out in the cafeteria and talk," she said. "Friendships are born out of our kids going there."

Located at the Zion Lutheran Elementary School on First Avenue, the school was established in 1965 by

German immigrants who wanted to preserve their culture. The concept has evolved to second- and third-generation German-Americans who are trying to get in touch with their heritage, according to Lester. "Many of our graduates are now bringing their children here," she said.

Some American-born parents with no German blood sign their children up for classes.

There are also advanced conversational classes for adults on Thursdays and Saturdays.

The Saturday classes for children, who range from 4 to 16 years old, cost roughly \$590 per student for the 10-month school year. The program is partially funded by the German government.

There are at least 39 similar German-language schools throughout the country, including in Morristown and Union, Lester said.

More than 20 percent of Americans claim to be of German ancestry, according to Werner Schmidt, press officer for the German Consul General in New York. In Bergen County, 99,239 residents reported being first- or second-generation German and 41,628 reported it in Passaic County, according to the 2004 U.S. census, a spokesman said.

The trend of sending children to German school has grown in recent years, Schmidt added. That's a big change from the previous generation. After World War II, most German-Americans were ashamed of their background and tried to hide their roots, he said.

"Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, more and more people started showing pride in their German heritage. The reunification of Germany gave them a reason to be proud again," he said.

There are additional benefits to learning a foreign language. Some studies have shown that people learn more effectively if they are multilingual. Parents and educators say that knowing more than one language sets apart college applicants and can help graduates thrive in the business world.

Recent state legislation allows students to receive high school credit for study at foreign language programs if the local district has no comparable program. As a component of the Westwood school curriculum, students in higher grades are prepared to take the German SAT or the German Advanced Placement test.

Sonja Radovic, who was born and raised in Germany and now lives in Westwood, has been sending her children to the school for four years. It's so important to her that her children learn German that she speaks to them exclusively in German at home.

"I want my kids to know that this is where their mother comes from," she said. "I want them to know German life, how the people talk, what the food is like. I miss Germany but I feel my kids now have the best of both worlds. When we go to Germany, people are impressed that they speak German so well."

Her son, Gregor, 7, said he enjoys going to German school because "my mom speaks German, and I want to learn it too."

Schmidt said that German schools such as the one in Westwood are very important to Germany. "We deeply appreciate that they want to remain in touch with the old country and always have an open heart for us," he said.

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