

Seeing beyond a disability

Blind student teacher brings new perspective to PHES

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The farewell presents they gave Isabell Pfeufer were unique, but so were the lessons she taught students at Patrick Henry Elementary School.

During her last afternoon in Jenny L'Esperance's second- and third-grade class, students showered Isabell Pfeufer – who has been completely blind since birth – with sensory tokens of their affection.

First came giggles as children listened to an audio recording of classmates recounting their favorite memories from their three weeks with Pfeufer: “Ms. Isabell has a Braille typewriter and a special machine that helps you tell colors ...” “She actually does this job without making any mistakes!” “I liked when she helped us walk with the cane.” “Ms. Isabell can hear even the quietest whisper!”

Pfeufer, 24, a Berlin native and Heidelberg University student, came to L'Esperance's classroom in mid-September to complete a three-week student teaching practicum. Each day, she met fellow German student teachers at the train station. From there, they took public transportation to reach their classrooms.

With the aid of a Braille wave computer, voice software and scanning equipment, Pfeufer and cooperating teacher L'Esperance were able to ‘translate’ class materials into Braille characters.

During her practicum, Pfeufer facilitated a Braille unit with the children, first presenting them with their own nametags – in Braille characters. The children later completed an in-depth study of the alphabet's founder, Louis Braille. The unit culminated with activity centers that featured interactive activities introducing the children to a Braille typewriter and puzzle, an ear diagram and sound game. Students not only approved of these hands-on activities but also of Pfeufer.

“I will miss her because she

has been nice to everybody. She did hard work as a student teacher,” said Alana, 7.

Anja, also 7, echoed Alana's praise. “She can hear better than us! When someone distracted me, she heard him and she said, ‘stop that please.’”

Jorel, 7, added, “I am glad that she wanted to come to our classroom, so I could learn how to feel the vibrations from her walking cane.”

Pfeufer was also impressed by lessons she and the children learned. “At first, the children were shy with me,” she said. “But then they had many good questions about how I dress myself, pack my backpack, read and write, eat, and if I can see when I open my eyes.”

Pfeufer attributes her own professional development to an “open-minded American school system” and L'Esperance.

“I learned so much about teaching and myself during the past three weeks,” Pfeufer said. “Never did I feel afraid of failing in this environment. I have developed a toolbox of skills and strategies valuable to beginning teachers.”

The practice of assigning German student teachers to American classrooms began in late 2004, thanks to a U.S. Army Europe host nation pilot project initiated by Heidelberg Schools Liaison Officer Jim Ruehmeling.

In the past five years, nearly 200 pre-service teachers have been placed. Before Pfeufer, however, a blind student teacher had never taught in Heidelberg's DoDDS schools.

Earlier this year, Pfeufer contacted Ruehmeling to inquire about being placed in an American school. Initially, the telephone conversation with the prospective student teacher was much like any other. A few minutes into their conversation, she mentioned, “by the way, I am blind.”

Ruehmeling found himself impressed by her enthusiasm and persistence. “Each day I left working thinking, ‘we have to make this (placement) happen,’” he said.



Patrick Henry Elementary School student teacher Isabell Pfeufer listens carefully as students edit their book reports Oct. 2. Pfeufer, who has been blind since birth, completed a three-week practicum with the class in September and October.

Some safety concerns had to be addressed before moving forward with the placement, but by September, Pfeufer had made it to L'Esperance's classroom.

Ruehmeling attributes the student teacher's successful experience to cooperating teacher L'Esperance. “Jenny made this happen. Lots of teachers would have been intimidated by such a placement.”

L'Esperance said she knew from the moment she met Pfeufer that the placement would work, due to her adaptability. “I have a great appreciation for Isabell's courage and her kind, wonderful spirit,” the veteran teacher said.

L'Esperance also was impressed with how well her students adapted to Pfeufer being in the classroom. “Her presence has engendered a great sense of empathy in the children. They now help guide Isabell from one transition to another by putting a hand on her shoulder.”

L'Esperance pondered how adults would respond in similar situations with special needs individuals.

“In reality, how many times are we hesitant to help people with special needs?” she asked. “Perhaps we are unsure what to say. Or maybe we're worried about hurting someone's feel-

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-Isabell Pfeufer, student teacher at PHES

ings ... In the future, I hope my students will be less shy when they encounter others like Isabell. Perhaps while they are out and about in the world they will initiate such a conversation naturally.”

L'Esperance even thinks her students' exposure to someone with a special need might help them approach their own varying skill levels in a more constructive light.

“Perhaps a child who has trouble reading might ask himself, ‘what adaptations can I make to become a better reader?’” she said.

Ruehmeling sees the German student teacher placement program as a “win-win” for everyone involved. “The introduction of a German pre-service teacher student enhances adult-to-student ratios and introduces children to a native German speaker,” he said. “And German practicum students receive mentors that you don't find everywhere. DoDDS produces some of the fin-

est teachers – individuals that demonstrate continual growth as professionals.”

Despite her blindness, Pfeufer knew since she was a child that she wanted to become a teacher. “As a disabled person, you can reach your goals if you are willing to work on them. I cannot do everything I want. I cannot drive, for example. But I can successfully live with my disability.”

She anticipates graduating from the University of Heidelberg in three years. In her spare time, she enjoys playing piano, guitar and flute, and singing rap music.

By the end of the goodbye party, children had stuffed the departing student teacher's canvas bag with carefully-crafted gifts. Among them: a heart-shaped rock, three-dimensional drawings studded with artistically-placed glue droplets, and a gingerbread heart with Braille characters – its message: “Thank you, Ms. Isabell.”