

Hills man returns favor on Scottish teacher exchange

BY MARIE CHESTNEY
STAFF WRITER

Arriving in Livonia recently, Alasdair MacLeod got his first surprise. With Halloween closing in, ghosts, goblins and other spirits abounded around town.

MacLeod, a teacher and principal from Scotland, never knew Halloween was such a big deal in the U.S.

"There's been a backlash in Britain against Halloween from religious groups, so it's not a popular holiday," said MacLeod, experiencing his third visit to the U.S. and first as an exchange teacher from Scotland.

MacLeod, who lives on Scotland's Isle of Lewis, spent the bulk of his time in Livonia at Grant Elementary School, renewing his new friendship with Dennis Sayles, a first-grade teacher at Grant. MacLeod left today to return home.

In mid-June, after the school year ended here, Sayles started the friendship with a visit to MacLeod's school in Aignish, Scotland where the school year doesn't end until late June.

Sayles traveled as an exchange teacher through the Michigan Educators Exchange Opportunities Abroad Project which promotes international understanding and cooperation by visits to other nations' schools.

"It's important to have a global understanding and not see things through the eyes of a suburb in Michigan," said Sayles, who lives in Farmington Hills.

Sayles chose Scotland because English is spoken there. In MacLeod's 57-student, 120-year-old school, 20 percent of the first-graders speak Gaelic; the rest speak English. By the time they

leave the elementary school in Aignish, all speak English.

Another surprise for MacLeod visiting Livonia schools is the relaxed dress code for elementary students. While Red Wings T-shirts dominate Grant's halls, in Scotland, all students dress the same — in uniforms.

And MacLeod was equally as surprised to see American flags flying outside Livonia homes and businesses. In Scotland, the only public place Scots see the national flag flying is at soccer games, the country's national sport.

While Scots might not fly the flag, Sayles discovered they are lovers of local history, and have strong roots to their past.

While in Scotland, Sayles also missed Michigan's many trees. There are few trees on the Isle of Lewis, which is 250 miles northwest of Glasgow.

Aignish, with its 40 homes and 100 residents, sits on the tip of a peninsula, surrounded by water in a spot where "you can't get away from the sea," MacLeod said.

MacLeod grew up in Aignish and now, with wife Christine and two teen-age sons, lives in the same house in which he was raised. In fact, he is the fifth generation of MacLeods to live in the house.

While visiting the MacLeods last June, Sayles discovered the sense of tradition that permeates Scottish life. While Livonia families might have relatives in California or Florida, in Scotland, families live in the same neighborhood for generations.

Overseas learning

Two educators — one from Livonia and the other from a small town in Scotland — have visited each other's homelands and shared experiences.



The educators discovered they have two things in common. One is education's eternal quest for more money to operate the schools. The second is their mutual dislike for the piles of paperwork teachers must do.

The need for extra money became compelling recently after the killing of Scottish schoolchildren in Dunblane.

"We have an open door policy, where people wander in whenever they want to," MacLeod said. "After the killings, every school was surveyed to see how security could be improved."

"But the problem is resources. Security systems are difficult and costly to put in our old schools. The one change we did make is to have only one entrance to each school."

"But the government is pro-state schools, so they're making more money available."



For peat's sake: Farmington Hills resident and Livonia Public Schools teacher Dennis Sayles had first-hand experience digging for peat, which is typically used for fires in rural Scottish life. Sayles stayed in Scotland as part of a teacher exchange Michigan Educators Exchange Opportunities Abroad Project. He recently hosted Alasdair MacLeod.



by Stuart M. Feldheim
Attorney at Law

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