

French native leads students in cultural exchange program

By Patricia N. Bowling
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Hugette Ralrigh feels sorry for the spectators in life — the uninvolved people closed in by a 9-to-5 job and a television.

The 46-year-old Novi resident thrives on being involved with people. "That's what life is all about," she says. Most recently, Ralrigh has become actively involved in the lives of 26 Walled Lake school district families whose children are participating in the "Back to Back" exchange program with 26 French families.

A native of France, Ralrigh was selected as the bilingual counselor for the program. In addition to instructing the families in beginning French, she will serve as counselor for the 26 French children visiting the Walled Lake School District for three weeks in March and accompany the 15 local children on their three-week trip to France in May.

LEARNING ANY new language is a broadening experience for children, Ralrigh says. It's not easy — the words are hard to pronounce. When children realize this, they develop a greater respect for people from other countries and may be less likely to ridicule people with strong accents — as children are prone to do.

"Everyone is quite willing to learn," she says of the children and their parents. "The mothers ask very pertinent questions, like how do you say, 'Put this away,' and 'Let's go.'"

As they learn the language, the parents and children learn about the customs of the country they will experi-

ence in the exchange program. "It's very exciting to think of yourself as being involved with people of a different culture. They have different customs, different food, even different school hours," Ralrigh says. "The education you get, you will never forget."

THE EXCHANGE program offers a unique learning opportunity for both students and family, she adds. "It's the easiest way to teach anything — it's the ultimate in learning... plus they will make friendships — friendships that might never stop."

When the French children come to Michigan in March, they will experience some of the things Ralrigh experienced when she came to the United States 23 years ago.

"They'll find the warmth of the American people. Americans are very warm, very open, very giving... the kids won't want to go back (to France)," she says.

"This is really a children's world. There's a lot of freedom, a lot of open space. It's like one big playground. Children are allowed to be themselves."

When the local children travel to France in May, their experience will be somewhat different, Ralrigh explains.

While still full of culture and history, France is a different country than what it was when Ralrigh grew up, she says. There were not all the modern conveniences when she left her native country. "France is a small America now," she explains.

THE DIFFERENCES between American and French lifestyles are subtle, Ralrigh says. She is encouraging

the French families not to change anything about the way they live to accommodate their American guests. "You must let them see you as you live," she says.

"Life is slower (in France). Much more time is spent at home. Meal time is extremely important. All (members of the family) come home for dinner together."

"The family is closer physically (be-

cause of smaller homes), and, therefore, they must be together more often," she adds.

Walled Lake district children going to France range in age from 9 to 12, and may be a little young to fully appreciate the rich history and culture in France, according to Ralrigh.

"But I want them to be open," Ralrigh says. "Just walking down the street can be an educational experience."

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