

German influence comes to Vandalia

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VANDALIA — The first thing the four Sister Cities exchange students from Lichtenfels, Germany, noticed when they got off the plane in Cincinnati is that everything in the United States is bigger.

Since their arrival March 17, the four students — Eva Maria Hohner, 18, Holger Reinlein, 17, Yvonne Boysen, 15, and Fabian Espach, 15 — have toured a good part of the region. But that first impression hasn't changed.

"The first thing I'll say when I go back is that everything is bigger and much cheaper here," Hohner said.

The students, here for three weeks through the through the Sister Cities Youth Exchange Program, are staying with host families in Vandalia and Butler Twp. They are immersing themselves in American culture, right down to attending classes at Butler High School.

In return, the students have been teaching their host families about German culture and language. And in the true spirit of a cultural exchange, their wry observations about the American lifestyle provide a new perspective on our own culture.

"The American lifestyle is so different from Germany," Boysen said.

Those differences include a younger driving age, more restaurants and larger stores, bigger cars and cheaper gas prices (gas in Lichtenfels is the equivalent of \$8 a gallon), and longer school days. The students also said they were surprised by the lack of passenger trains and recycling. And then there's our affinity for big-box stores that never close.

"Wal-Mart is wonderful. You can go there 24 hours a day and get anything you want ... but I would say it's not necessary to buy car tires at 2 a.m.," Reinlein remarked.

By the time they leave Monday, April 7, the students will have visited the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, several museums in Cincinnati, the Statehouse in Columbus, and The Greene and Fairfield malls. Reinlein, a volunteer fire fighter in Lichtenfels, also has been making the rounds to area fire stations.

By all appearances, the cultural exchange is doing exactly what was intended: Students from both sides of the Atlantic are learning about each other's culture and the trials and delights of visiting a foreign country.

"The camaraderie that's among them is amazing," Mary Blakesly, who is hosting Hohner, said of the good-natured relationship between the Germans and their U.S. counterparts. "They are like brothers and sisters, and they've only known each other a little over a week."

The Sister Cities of Vandalia sponsors a yearly student exchange with Lichtenfels. The cities have been sister cities since 1975; today, the Sister Cities of Vandalia boasts a membership of 300 Vandalia and Butler Twp. residents.