In 1961, Indiana University Bloomington founded the Honors Program in Foreign Languages for High School Students as an innovative curriculum to reinforce French, German, and Spanish language learning in the high schools of Indiana. A year later, three programs were implemented in France, Germany, and Spain. Each year, outstanding junior and senior students around the state compete to be selected—about one in four—to spend seven weeks in six towns and cities in France, Germany, Mexico, and Spain. There are two programs in France, one in Germany, two in Spain, and one in Mexico, averaging 30 participants each. Students receive formal instruction in language and culture courses, participate in a variety of social and cultural activities, and live with host families during their entire stay. Above all, they pledge to abide by the “no-English rule,” a rule that is seldom broken. Their teachers are either graduate students from Indiana University, Indiana high schools teachers, or local teachers recruited from the host towns. The entire program is directed by Jacqueline Danner and administered by the Office of International Programs.

Summer 2001 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Honors Program. Of the first three city programs begun in 1962, the French program in Saint-Brieuc, a town of about 48,000 on the northern coast of Brittany, is the oldest remaining of the original three sites. This year’s group of 32 17-year-olds arrived on July 9 and left on August 21, wiser and happier for having achieved their goals of “living in French” their entire stay. They found time to tour the surrounding countryside and the beaches of Normandy and spend a few memorable days in Paris. The group included one student who was the seventh member of his family to enroll in the Saint-Brieuc program, having been preceded by his father and five of his uncles and aunts in what has become an ongoing family tradition. All told, counting students, organizers, instructors, and host families, almost 5,000 people have participated in the Saint-Brieuc program over the 40-year period.

To celebrate the 40 years of continuous educational exchange, the mayor of Saint-Brieuc, Bruno Joncour, invited the entire group, accompanied by all the host families, for a special day of recognition at City Hall. The event was arranged by local coordinator Brigitte Blévin, who has been with the program for the past 13 years, and it was covered by the local press. The students spoke glowingly of their experiences and expressed their appreciation to the mayor and the citizens of Saint-Brieuc. As a special gesture, one of the students from Indianapolis presented the French mayor with the keys to the city of Indianapolis. The day ended with a special dinner with the mayor and program staff.

In October, Danner invited many “friends” of the Honors Program to a fortieth anniversary
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suffering everywhere—beginning right here in our own community.”

Nazif Shahriani, chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program, issued an open letter signed by all faculty members of the department stating the need for greater world understanding. “As educators we hope that this tragedy, which has brought the peoples of the United States together in an unprecedented manner, will also offer the opportunity to combat the unjust socioeconomic conditions that breed the rise of extremism in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East. It is also our hope that this tragedy will bring about greater education and mutual understanding of shared values between world religious communities and civilizations, especially those of Islamic and Western civilizations rooted in Abrahamic religious traditions.”

Throughout the difficult two weeks following the tragedy, classes continued to be held, although most regular campus events were cancelled. In their place, there were extraordinary discussion groups, observant candlelight vigils, blood drives, and special services sponsored by a broad spectrum of the university’s diverse community.

In the Bloomington community itself, organizers of the annual Lotus World Music and Arts Festival kept to the festival schedule in spite of the cancellation of some individual events. Dean for International Programs Patrick O’Meara officially opened the international festival, conveying a welcome reaffirmation of values. “This is the time to lift our spirits. It is so important to reaffirm the special role of music and art in helping us to understand how people from different parts of the world live, celebrate, and perceive beauty. The lotus is a wonderful symbol of beauty, peace, and serenity. The Lotus Festival celebrates the real spirit of our world.”

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celebration brunch hosted by International Programs Dean Patrick O’Meara. Guests included past and current teachers, student alumni, and other IU people involved in various ways with the Honors Program, including Grafton Trout, a past director of the program. The Indiana-based high school teachers and IU assistant instructors who teach or have taught in the program spoke as movingly about having had their lives transformed as did the students. All mentioned the warm friendships developed with host families and of resulting exchange visits. One French high school teacher from Indianapolis, whose two daughters went on the program, is now hosting the daughter of her daughters’ Saint-Brieuc family.

The student alumni were equally enthusiastic about their experiences. Many are now enrolled at IUB, continuing their passionate interest in languages. Among the many who spoke, one recounted how he had typically “loathed language study” in high school but became curious about Spanish after hearing about the Honors Program. Despite a less than stellar academic record, he applied and was accepted, and he gratefully credits Danner for having the insight to see his potential for success despite his record. Now a freshman at IUB majoring in political science, on a full scholarship from the National Guard, he has already earned certification by the U.S. Army as a Spanish translator.

The lunch was held at Bloomington’s only French restaurant, Le Petit Café, a fitting venue to celebrate one of IU’s longest-running and most successful study abroad language programs and one of the best of its kind in the nation.

—RMN

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