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) Peter Wustner, a West German student, claps with delight as Ophe Romero plays the accordion

Exchange students tour Acadiana

By ANGELA SIMONEAUX
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ST. MARTINVILLE — The students who stood beside the Evangeline Oak here Friday communicated with each other very well, even though they spoke different languages.

Half the students live in Louisiana and half live in West Germany, but they are all visually impaired.

Through a Baton Rouge-based exchange program, they evolved into a group and had fun together.

Their visit to Longfellow Evangeline State Park was just one stop in a jaunt through Acadiana's swamps, parks and historic landmarks, planned for them by Operation Cross Sight.

Operation Cross Sight offers cultural and educational exchanges between visually impaired West German and American students. Baton Rouge's Monika Olivier engineers the trips between the two countries, begs for funds to pay for the exchanges, teaches German for months before the exchanges take place, and keeps everybody in line during the trips.

All of the German students involved are from West Germany, but in light of recent political developments, Olivier said she may try to involve East German students in the future.

Ten German students, ranging in age from 14 to 22, arrived in Florida on April 7, accompanied by five chaperones. They were joined by 11 students and four chaperones from Louisiana.

They had two days to get to know each other on the sands of Fort Walton Beach, then drove to Louisiana to go fishing in Zachary and tour the French Quarter, Riverwalk and Audubon Zoo in New Orleans.

They drove to Henderson Friday morning, toured the swamp, and arrived at Longfellow Evangeline Park Friday afternoon. The students have use of the camp at the park for three days, courtesy of the state of Louisiana.

Friday afternoon, the students ate lunch under moss-draped oaks, then toured the 150-year-old Acadian house that stands on the park grounds. The house is filled with antiques, and the students had a good time examining the objects of everyday life of the 1850s.

Some of the students can see; some are blind. Many of the sighted students helped their friends by describing things as the blind students ran their fingers over the objects.

After a tour through the house, the students strolled to the park's visitor center and enjoyed authentic Cajun music and a Cajun storyteller.

Max Greig, a descendant of the last family to live in the Acadian house, told a story that sounded suspiciously like the one about Brer Rabbit, and the Romero Brothers — Lennox and Ophe — played the accordion and triangle for the students.

Olivier sat beside Greig and translated his tale into German. As Greig spoke, the American students laughed. A few seconds later, after Oliver repeated his words, the German students laughed.

But the kids enjoyed the music in unison. They clapped, hummed along, and some laughed with delight as the Romeros played Cajun songs and more familiar tunes like "Don't Mess with my Toot-Toot" and Hank Williams' "Jambalaya."

After the Romeros were finished, the German students favored their new American friends with several German folk songs, their voices floating over the bayou.

Peter Wustner, a 22-year-old German student, became positively animated as the Romero Brothers performed.

"You would have to know Peter, see how he usually is," Olivier said. "He is usually so withdrawn. That's what this is all about, getting them to experience things. And sometimes, the effects of these trips are lasting."

After the music, the students went back to their camp, where they enjoyed a crawfish boil.

On Saturday, they toured Conoco, visited with a Blind sculptor and toured St. Martinville. They spent Easter Sunday with local families.

On Monday, they are set to tour Avery Island, followed by a banquet and a Mardi Gras Ball. Tuesday is filled with parties, and on Wednesday the students will tour Baton Rouge's Rural Life Museum, visit with Mayor Tom Ed McHugh and shop at Cortina Mall.

Cross Sight relies entirely on donations to fund the trips, Olivier said. To find out more about the exchange, call Olivier at (504) 927-7375.

The German students who participated were: Herbert Kerscher, Gerald Ratjen, Rudolf Buckelsch, Reiner Schlieermann, Gunter Butschan, Agnes Bauer, Dietmar Umhauer, Peter Wustner, Philipp Rummel and Cassie Dittmann. Chaperones Reinhold Stabel, Markus Stummler, Larry Garret, Anne Breaux and Wolfgang Reiss, all teachers at the German schools the students attend, accompanied them.