Corey Porche spent years dancing to Cajun music and zydeco without really listening to the words. But after playing his guitar at jam sessions and receiving a CD of the legendary Balfa Brothers, Porche felt a strange gnawing inside.

Porche had to learn more about the vaguely-familiar, French language that made him want to dance and play music.

“I started remembering my grandpa speaking those words to his neighbor, Miss Domingue,” said Porche, 38. “I had this moment where I realized I’m supposed to be speaking this language. I’d go ask my grandpa questions and he’d get agitated. He wasn’t too into me trying to dissect what he spoke.”

So Caroline Helm told me there’s a place you can go and learn the language in five weeks. I told her that was crazy. Then she told me there was like three girls to every guy, so I was like ‘Alright.’”

Porche not only attended the Université Sainte Anne in Pointe-de-l’Eglise, Nova Scotia, he now serves as the “agent en Louisiane” for the school’s spring and summer French Immersion programs.

Considered one of world’s best, the St. Anne program allows students to immerse themselves in the language and culture of the region.

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French

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Students of all ages to live life in French for five weeks. Students are housed on campus and must speak in French for five weeks. Students who violate this rule receive an "announcement," or warning. After three warnings, the student is sent home.

Students literally live in another language with 70 percent of the learning done outside the classroom. Sports, games, workshops, theater, theme nights, whale-watching expeditions and other excursions are just a few of the activities that keep students busy learning and conversing from sunrise to bedtime.

Some, who arrive knowing not one word of French, graduate as fluent speakers.

Grammy-winning Cajun musician Steve Riley attended St. Anne a decade ago. Riley said the program completely changed his use and understanding of the language of his ancestors. "Before I went, my French was all right," said Riley. "I could get by language of his ancestors. "

"When you call home and you tell your mom and you have to speak English, your tongue is in a different part of your mouth," said Doucet. "You cannot pronounce English words. It's a weird transformation.

"When you have that first dream in French, it's pretty amazing to remember it. It definitely got me out of my shell. You have to participate."

Although he arrived knowing little French, Porche won an award for his progress during the program. At graduation, he gave a 10-minute speech, done entirely in French and only using bullet point notes.

Within a month of returning home, Porche received a scholarship from the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission to represent artist Robert Dafford in the eastern Caribbean island of Martinique.

"I got paid to go to Martinique and hang out for 10 days as a translator and do interviews on the news about the finer points on Robert's artwork," said Porche. "Since then, I've been back to Martinique to teach dance. I've gotten this Rotary scholarship for a professional exchange in Lyon, France, based on my ability to speak French.

"I've backpacked around France for a couple of months. When I go to France, people ask me if I'm Canadian. I take that as a huge compliment because they're not responding to me in English. They're thinking I'm a Francophone from Canada. That's all because of St. Anne."

Porche said those trips helped him understand French is not only a connection to roots and culture. A second language also helps to compete in today's global economy.

"Bilingualism is a big deal all over the country. A lot of schools have French immersion, Spanish immersion. Now we're seeing these international schools pumping tons of money to be able to learn Mandarin and these other languages.

"Since (French) was here and a natural part of

Kristi Guillory and Matthew Doucet, former students of the Universite Sainte Anne in Nova Scotia, play accordion and fiddle. Photos by Leslie Westbrook, The Advertiser

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