

Five Visiting Teachers Bring the World to Watauga High School

Written by Marshall Ashcraft, WC Schools
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Five teachers visiting Watauga High School this fall from other countries are helping bring new perspectives and broader horizons for high school students, faculty, and each other as they work toward professional development on an international level. One teaches English in a Palestinian refugee camp, another in a country where the educational system is being rebuilt from scratch. Some of their schools have lots of technology and other resources in classrooms while others face severe challenges. Their home climates and terrain include places arid and wet, cold and tropical, mountainous and flat. Diverse in national origin, in ethnicity, and in their home country teaching environment, all five are now sharing the common experience of being in American high school classrooms.

Each of the five teaches English as a foreign language in their home country and each is paired with an English teacher at the high school for their time in the classroom. Pablo Andres' Galvez de Leon of Guatemala is with Ron Hopper, Samnang Yun from Cambodia is with Robin Lowe, Asiyat Gukova from Russia is with Sarah Callahan, Tatiana Pak from Kyrgyzstan is with Amanda Wallace, and Wafa' Mahmoud Aqel is with Mary Kent Whittaker. Their time together gives visiting teachers the opportunity to see how high school education works in this country, to share teaching ideas and methods with their American counterparts, and allows guests and hosts to learn from each other about the culture and people of their respective communities and countries.

On Tuesday morning in Ross Auditorium at Watauga High School, the visiting teachers took time to speak to students and answer questions. As each spoke, a Google Earth map on a large screen in the auditorium showed the city and country the teacher was from. The questions students asked covered topics ranging from school hours and class sizes to favorite sports and foods to religious faiths in the teachers' home countries.

School days and hours in their home countries varied widely among visiting teachers and none were very much like the typical American school calendar. Class sizes also differed, but several cited average class sizes of 40-45 and one leads classes with 65-70 students.

When asked about their experience of Americans and American culture, the responses of several teachers shared a theme that certain negative stereotypes common in their home country were being weakened or dispelled during their time here. Images of Americans as greedy, selfish, and usually fat to boot had been countered by experiencing acts of personal generosity and kindness and by seeing most students are not overweight and that many are committed to healthy eating and exercise.

Pablo Andres' Galvez de Leon from Guatemala drew the biggest laugh in answering a question about whether he had heard of Justin Bieber. "Unfortunately, yes" was his response. Asked if she like to dance, Asiyat Gukova from Russia replied that she "loved to dance," but would need some music to demonstrate. Samnang Yun of Cambodia spoke movingly of how Cambodia's educational system had to be rebuilt from scratch because of the genocide his country experienced in the 1970's, and of how he hoped to apply as much as possible of what he learned here to help his students back home. Wafa' Mahmoud Aqel of Jordan and Tatiana Pak of Kyrgyzstan pointed out that their students liked to use their free time in most of the same ways as students in the U.S.

Teachers and students alike praised the value and significance of the international sharing provided through the visits. Watauga High School English teacher Robin Lowe said the experience "has not only broadened my cultural awareness, increased my knowledge of the

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world, and changed my perspective of my own country, it has given me a great new friend with whom I plan to keep in touch.” Wafa Aqel reflected that “whenever there is a human being, there is an opportunity for kindness. And I found the kindest teacher in the world here in WHS. My experience here was like a spring day.” Trevor Eggers, a sophomore at the high school, stated that “having Wafa with us has really changed me...even though Wafa is of a different race and culture, I feel as if we are no different from one another.” Ron Hopper commented that the experience “has been one of the highlights of my teaching career... It has made me aware of the fact that teachers and students around the world have many more similarities than differences and has given me a new perspective on the importance of global awareness in our classrooms.”

The visiting teachers are brought here through the Teaching Excellence and Achievement (TEA) program of the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. TEA brings excellent high school teachers from other countries to the U.S. to help them further improve their teaching skills and to increase their knowledge of this country. The program also enables selected American teachers to visit the home schools of teachers who have been to America and to collaborate in developing workshops and sharing best educational practices. TEA is affiliated with IREX, an international nonprofit organization with the mission to “promote positive lasting change globally.”

There seems to be no doubt among visitors or hosts that this mission has been advanced this fall at Watauga High School.