

Several SK students study abroad in the mountains of Switzerland*

by Sophie Olsen

The Ecole d'Humanite is a small, international boarding school that is home to 150 students from over twenty-five different countries. Six students hail from South County. They are: Micah Siegel (17), Gillian Bell (16), Olivia Vinhateiro (17), Max Vinhateiro (14), Caleb Nelson (15), and Toby Olsen (14).

It started when Deb Drew, a Wakefield resident and former Ecole student and teacher, was asked by the school director if she knew of any high school students who would be interested in studying at the Ecole. This led Drew to inquire with the Siegel's oldest daughter, Tamara Siegel, a sophomore at Narragansett High School back in 1996. Micah Siegel admits that it was hearing about her sister's experience at the school that made her interested in going herself. "I went because when I was eight my older sister went and it made me really want to go."

Olivia Vinhateiro added that it was not only because her older brother had studied there, but because she felt unsatisfied with the current education she was receiving. "I was at a school where I felt stuck in a routine I did not like."

It is the diversity of the student body and the availability of the teachers that make the Ecole a special place, and sets it apart from the conventional high school experience.

This is what enticed Siegel and Olivia Vinhateiro, along with all the other former and current South County high schoolers that have made the same choice.

The international atmosphere plays an important role in the Ecole lifestyle. Vinhateiro explains that "different cultures add to the community, but it doesn't define a person." Becoming close friends with a person from a different culture has made both Siegel and Olivia Vinhateiro realize that while a person's culture matters, friendship and finding a common connection with someone can enable people to transcend cultural differences. "When you get down to it no one cares where you are from," Siegel said.

Not only is it this important lesson in global understanding that students gain from the Ecole, they also reap the benefits of having teachers who are more readily available for academic help and support. "I was really struggling with physics this fall, so my teacher and I ended up doing extra work together on Sundays, and that wouldn't happen other places," Siegel explained.

Olivia Vinhateiro and Siegel agreed that they enjoy going to class and learning at the Ecole. "The teachers really care and are unique," Vinhateiro said.

* Permission from The Narragansett Times, all rights reserved

Siegel adds that "school before was like going to a job, it's so fun and wonderful to go to school with creative teachers and students." Besides the regular academic classes that students attend in the morning, a wealth of afternoon classes are offered that range from folkdancing and theatre improvisation, to metal-smithing and woodworking. Not to mention the skiing and snowboarding that is mandatory for the students to participate in during the winter term. The school was founded in 1946 by German philosopher and educator Paul Geheeb. He was a firm believer that children need only the right environment to grow and develop their unique skills. He designed a curriculum with community practices that would help make the Ecole a place where this could happen. His methods include providing small classes with a student teacher ratio small enough for each student to receive individual attention, as well as a community small enough for each person to feel they have a place in it.

The Ecole strives for a simple, environmentally and socially responsible lifestyle. In order to instill these values in the students the Ecole emphasizes the importance of appreciating nature, believing that a day outdoors in the beautiful Swiss mountains is just as important as a day spent in chemistry class.

Every Friday afternoon the entire school gathers for a school assembly. During this time students and teachers discuss and debate issues that are going on in the community. The small community makes it possible for every person's voice to be heard.

Olivia Vinhateiro states that the strong community she experiences at the Ecole has changed who she is. "It is wonderful for me to find a way to be involved in a community, and it has affected the way I deal with people now."

Siegel and Olivia Vinhateiro also feel that the bonds they share with fellow students and teachers became closer more quickly. "I feel so close to my friends at the Ecole after only one year of knowing them," Siegel said.

The common outcome of this experience is that students leave well-rounded individuals and as potentially more effective members of their communities.