

# German university students tour Connellsville

By KAYLIE MOORE

As part of the Master's Program at Germany's Heidelberg University, 18 German students and three professors spent a few days exploring the Connellsville area.

After touring Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Ohio-pyle State Park Tuesday, Dr. Gregg Culver arranged a full itinerary for students on Wednesday.

Culver, a Connellsville native, began teaching at Heidelberg University two years ago. He is a Research Associate with the American Studies and Geography programs.

"As part of the university program, students are required to take a large field trip, which generally ends up being international. Most of them are geography students," Culver said. "Right now, we're most interested in urban geography, such as the development of cities and how they change."

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Students from Germany's Heidelberg University learn about Connellsville's historic train display at the Canteen Wednesday afternoon.

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**Students from Germany's Heidelberg University stopped at the Connellsville Canteen for a presentation by Fayette County Cultural Trust President Michael Edwards and Executive Director Daniel Cocks Wednesday, before continuing their tour of the city. Pictured: Michael Edwards, Daniel Cocks, Dr. Ulrike Gerhard, Dr. Gregg Culver, Dr. Wilfried Mausbach, Anja Baniewicz, Evi Bauder, Clarissa Begon, Jannika Drechsler, Mona Flaig, Sven Greschull, Matthias Knaupp, Karina Krampf, Bekir Kurtulmus, Heinrich Lori, Julia Maria Merk, Kai Morgenstern, Nikola Niemeyer, Robert Pelipez, Malte Schweizerhof, Ronja Tornow, Christiane Vinck and Fahminda Yasmin.**

## —German

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Culver said the trip is meant to teach his students about America's "Rust Belt," the former industrial area of the United States. The group began their 16-day trip in Chicago, Ill., before traveling to Milwaukee, Wis., and Pittsburgh's steel valley area.

Culver said the group plans to travel via Amtrak train to Washington, D.C. before returning to Germany.

"We wanted to stop in Appalachia. It's easy to go to the big cities, but we wanted them to experience a small town and talk about how the area is changing and expanding. We thought this was the perfect spot to stop and talk about that," said Culver. "I'm also from here, so it was great to be able to bring them here to my hometown."

Gerry Browell and helpers from the Connellsville Christian Church hosted the students overnight. Chris Wallander gave them a personal tour of the Carnegie Free Library.

The students also toured the Aaron's Building with Norma Shallenberger, before Fayette County Cultural Trust President Michael Edwards and Executive Director Daniel Cocks held a presentation for them at the Connellsville Canteen.

Edwards' presentation covered the Canteen's history, local immigration and churches. Connellsville's ties to Germany and the 1936 Olympics, the progress along Crawford Avenue (formerly known as Main Street), annual festivals, promotional efforts, parks and trails, restoring the Edwin S. Porter Theatre, the new riverfront hotel, art galleries, bed and breakfasts, recent demolitions, the Amtrak station's growing popularity, development on Connellsville's west side, the Somerset Trust, coke ovens, General Brad-dock's Crossing, embracing local arts and the Laurel Highlands Native American Interpretive Center.

"Connellsville really had an influx of immigration, and it's really seen in our churches. As people started assimilating, they wanted their own church and wanted the services in English," Edwards told the students. "Connellsville has a vein of coal, which was some of the best coal in the industry."

Geography student Christiane Vinck, 26, said she was surprised by Connellsville's size.

"We knew we were going to Connellsville, so we started making jokes about this

very tiny town without any amenities, but we were very surprised by the number of restaurants and businesses," Vinck said. "Towns in Germany are of similar size, but they usually stop on bicycles and keep moving through. It's great that so many people come here through the train service."

Vinck said fellow student Malte Schweizerhof kept comparing Connellsville's development to Detroit, Mich.

"He said it's the same kind of development. A lot of things were demolished, but among them some flowers were able to pop up and sort of rise out of the ashes," Vinck said.

"Connellsville is really nice compared to being in the big cities. It's much more personal — like at the library, our guide could tell us where every piece of furniture in there was from," said student Julia Maria Merk. "It's really nice to see how people live here and learn what the town is about."

"What impressed me most was how the community organizations get so involved with everything and have really worked together to rebuild the area," said Prof. Dr. Ulrike Gerhard. "Everyone has also been very friendly and welcoming to us."

Culver said he hopes his students really "got a sense of small town life and saw a lot of community effort."

"I love seeing all the programs work together. As a nation, it gives you a lot

of hope, and I think others should be made aware of how people can really make all the difference," said Culver. "Connellsville has a strong heritage. We have strong roots here, and other people need to see that."

In addition to the aforementioned organizations and individuals, Culver said he wanted to thank the Redevelopment Authority, the Colebrook Candy Company and Gary Wandel with the Yough River Trail Council.

Culver also credited his mother, retired teacher Jane Sandusky, with organizing the students' city tour.

"She really worked to tie this all together, and we're very grateful for her efforts," he said.

Additional attendees included Dr. Wilfried Mausbach, Anja Baniewicz, Evi Bauder, Clarissa Begon, Jannika Drechsler, Mona Flaig, Sven Greschull, Matthias Knaupp, Karina Krampf, Bekir Kurtulmus, Heinrich Lorei, Kai Morgenstern, Nikola Niemeyer, Robert Pelipez, Ronja Tornow and Fahminda Yasmin.

Despite plans to continue living and teaching in Germany "for a number of years to come," Culver said he enjoyed coming home for a while.

"I think the students were really fascinated by Connellsville and enjoyed their time here. I think people can be a little more proud of what we have here now, and they should try to build on that," he said.