

**Anoka County Union, Minnesota**

## **Switzerland to St. Francis High School**

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It's hard to believe Margaux De Graaf just recently began mastering the English language.

The 21-year-old Amity Institute intern teacher from Switzerland, who speaks with an understandable accent, is spending a year helping to teach French at St. Francis High School.

The University of Lausanne student left her family, friends and the world she knew so she could experience the American culture and master her English skills.

While she could understand English spoken around her, "I could not have a normal conversations with a good accent," said De Graaf.

Since arriving Sept. 30, De Graaf has been enjoying her experience and is "meeting great people here," she said.

De Graaf is one of the best Amity interns she has had, said French instructor Fran Carlson.

"Margaux is really good. We really lucked out with her," she said.

Amity interns bring another culture and more knowledge for the student to experience, according to Carlson.



**Leaving the University of Lausanne, north of Lake Geneva, Switzerland, for a year, Amity Intern Margaux De Graaf is looking forward to a year of experience at St. Francis High School. (Photo by Tammy Sakry)**

“It’s a such a plus. Not everyone can go to France,” Carlson said.

In addition to helping students with their pronunciation, De Graaf is opening up a new world for her students.

She will go online and find video clips of Swiss performers that “I wouldn’t know who to look for. The kids are loving it,” said Carlson.

De Graaf is in the United States to improve her English and “I’m trying to get as much out of (her) as I can” for the students, said Carlson.

Although De Graaf did not started at the school until September, she had already met with Carlson and some of her students while they were visiting France this summer.

She traveled to France twice from Switzerland to meet them, said Carlson.

De Graaf has a great sense of humor and she is from Switzerland, which lets the students know that other countries speak French other than France, she said.

## **Adapting**

One of the things Amity Institute tells their interns is to be adaptable.

Although she is immersed in a new country and culture, De Graaf is surprised how similar things are to her country and life.

“I (am) not having problems adapting myself. (I’m) not seeing a lot of differences,” she said.

The biggest change for her is the lack of commuter trains.

“I’m used to taking the train to travel around,” said De Graaf.

With trains traveling most hours of the day through every town and city, De Graaf was accustomed to traveling wherever she wished without needing a driver’s license.

“Here I’m completely dependent on friends for getting anywhere,” she said. “It’s really annoying, being like a child.”

Even though she is away from her family and friends, De Graaf said she is not homesick or missing her parents, younger brother, older sister and friends.

Phone calls and computer camera visits with her family helps.

Plus she will back in Switzerland in a year, she said.

Her parents were concerned about her being so far away, said De Graaf.

They did not know anything about the United States and they would have preferred she had gone to England so they could visit her, she said.

“But they are proud and happy because it is what I wanted,” said De Graaf.

And she is enjoying the experience and learning from other teachers.

“It is good to see how other (educators) teach and the kids are so good,” said De Graaf.

But it was not so easy the first month.

The first year students didn’t understand anything in the French language, said De Graaf.

With the help of Carlson, De Graaf was able to communicate with her students.

“For me, everything is new. The teachers in the World Language Department have allowed me to help teach French and have considered me an equal. I have been so impressed while observing them in their classes. Recently I taught a class by myself – it was a great moment,” De Graaf said in Amity Institute press release.

### **Out of school**

When De Graaf is not in the classroom, she goes home with Spanish instructor Jyl Dieckhaus to Brooklyn Park.

During her year here, De Graaf will live with three different St. Francis High School teachers.

Dieckhaus is the second teacher and around winter break, De Graaf will move in with another family.

“I want to see how other families live,” she said.

After three months, De Graaf will return to Dieckhaus’ home.

De Graaf said she loves going to concerts, theater and downtown with Dieckhaus.

Dieckhaus’ eight-year-old daughter helps her with her pronunciation as De Graaf helps with homework.

One of the things De Graaf would like to share is her improv skills.

She belongs to a group that travels and does a lot of improv, she said.

De Graaf said she would love to teach the students a little improv.

### **Amity Institute**

Her university instructor turned De Graaf onto Amity Institute after finding out she wanted to travel to an English-speaking country.

After researching the program, De Graaf decided to apply.

According to its Web site, Amity Institute, a nonprofit organization in San Diego, Calif., brings international educators to the United States to share knowledge and culture.

Founded in 1962, it works with a diverse network of schools throughout the country creating cross-cultural experience and to expose children to the world’s languages and cultures, promote global awareness and identity, and enrich the educational experience of both students and educators.

According to the Web site, through exposure to international educators, children develop stronger communication skills, improve their aptitude with foreign languages and gain a more tolerant perspective and appreciation of the diversity within the world's global community.

Intern teachers volunteer for teaching positions from preschool through the university level to assist in the classroom.

The interns work up to 25 hours per week, take personal study classes and live with host families.

The Amity intern program is open to single people between the ages of 20 and 30 who do not have children.

They must be enrolled in or have completed higher education.

The interns are only accepted if they are native speakers of Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese or Spanish.

According to the Amity Institute Web site, the applicant must have an enthusiasm for working with U.S. students and enjoy intercultural communication.

If accepted in the program, the interns receive room and board, transportation and meals at the school and in the home.

While the host family provides transportation to the school, the interns have to provide their own transportation during free time.

During school, the interns assist in the classroom, co-teach, provide conversation practice for individuals and groups, give cultural presentations and/or teach their own class.

As part of the application process, De Graaf had introduction letters, recommendation letters and filled out a dossier, including a description of her personality and why she wanted to be an intern.

Carlson used the dossier to select De Graaf.

“I could pick up on her sense of humor,” she said.

The school pays De Graaf \$200 a month and provides lunches for her, said Carlson.

The school also pays Amity Institute \$1,495, she said.

Carlson has used the program since 1992. “I would recommend it,” she said. “They are very, very easy to work with.”

The Amity staff is there to help and the students benefit from it, Carlson said.

For more information on Amity Institute, its Web site is [www.amity.org](http://www.amity.org) .

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