

Love of history, languages leads St. Charles senior abroad

Posted by [Alan Van Wormer](#) On 09/30/2018

Renee Deminne, a senior at St. Charles High School, studied Russian in Moldova over the summer. Deminne's love of history prompted her to apply for a state department program to study overseas.

WALDORF, Md. - Renee Deminne has always had an interest in eastern Europe. It's a fascination born out of Deminne's love of history. "I like history in general," said the St. Charles High School senior. "But eastern Europe is the intersection of Europe, the Middle East and Asia."

"She had an interest in history and languages fell into that," Deminne's mother, Theresa, said. "Her interest in history and language kind of collided."

Deminne spent the summer studying Russian in Moldova, a country between Romania and Ukraine that was formerly under Russian control. She was among 20 American high school students — out of 3,300 applicants — who received a National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) scholarship to participate in a six-week program through the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

The students stayed with host families near Moldova's capital, Kishinev, where they took language classes at Ion Creangă Pedagogical State University for four hours a day. After class, the students visited monuments, the post office, cafés — anywhere they could practice their Russian and learn more about Moldova.

"From what I could tell, it has a pretty colorful culture," Deminne said. "The people have colorful personalities, especially our professors. Moldova has a robust education system with students interested in their education, that's the impression I got."

David Monk, former instrumental music teacher at St. Charles, wrote a letter of recommendation for Deminne when she applied for the NSLI-Y scholarship. "She's a great kid," Monk said. "She's an extraordinary and very conscientious student."

The summer program was not the first Deminne was a part of. She spent the summer between her sophomore and junior year at Harvard University studying the Cold War. But, still, sending their daughter more than 4,900 miles away to Moldova made her parents a bit apprehensive. After researching the State Department program, they were on board. "She's always talked about wanting to travel extensively," Theresa Deminne said. All the family needed to supply was a passport and some spending money. All other expenses, even insurance, was covered by the program.

After studying Russian at a Moldovan university, American students, including Renee Deminne of St. Charles High School, would go explore parts of Moldova's capital city.

Not in Waldorf anymore

From the minute she arrived in Moldova, Deminne had to communicate in Russian — Romanian is also spoken in the country. "I tried to speak Russian as much as I could," she said, adding that it came in useful when getting around town using public transportation. "But I know one phrase in Romanian, 'Următoarea oprire.' It means 'Next stop.'" A Turkish language, Gagauz, is also spoken in the region.

Each morning before class, Deminne's host mother would give her a short motivational speech in Russian before Deminne headed to the university. During class, the students would study Russian and be introduced to Soviet films that were really good and funny, Deminne said.

After class, the Americans would split off into small groups to go out and about. Deminne found Moldovan food to be good. There were a lot of vegetables, the traditional borsch, salads of tomatoes and cucumbers that were served at most meals and the much-loved *plăcintă*, a filled pastry that could be sweet or savory. There was also a McDonald's where Deminne ordered a Lion Cereal McFlurry, a caramel, chocolate and cereal ice cream treat.

Back at home

"She came back with an appreciation of other cultures," Theresa Deminne said of her daughter. Traveling "broadens your view of the world and ironically it shrinks your world ... it doesn't seem like such a huge place," she said.

The NSLI-Y scholarship launched in 2006 as a multi-agency U.S. government program to improve Americans' ability to communicate in critical languages to advance international communication leading to increasing American economic global competitiveness. This year, about 670 American students studied Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Persian, Indonesian and Russian.

The program is another step toward the future Deminne is planning. She wants to study international relations/political science in college and work in diplomacy. After the summer in Moldova, Deminne is applying to take part in the NSLI-Y program that sends participants for a year of study abroad. She encourages other students to take part in a study abroad program to get exposed to other countries and cultures. "Even if you have a little interest, why not?" Deminne said. "If you don't know about the world, you don't know anything."