

Lorraine Thornquist – Chevalier of the Academic Laurels

Student exchanges over 20 years link Lycée St Paul with Brisbane Girls Grammar



Lorraine Thornquist has been awarded The Order of Academic Palms – one of the world's oldest civil orders

It is not every day that an Australian is presented with The Order of Academic Palms – one of the world's oldest civil orders. Created by Napoleon in 1808, the award is traditionally given to French educators who have made a major contribution to French national education and those outside France who have made a significant contribution to the expansion of French culture.

When Lorraine Thornquist, Director of International Studies at Brisbane Girls Grammar School, walked up to the podium at a recent school assembly she had no idea what an honour she was about to receive.

She told *Education Today*, she thought Monsieur J el Bernuchon, from affiliate school Lyc e Saint Paul in Angoul me France, was about to present her with something for the school. Both schools were celebrating the 20th

student exchange through the International Affiliate Schools Program, which began at Brisbane Girls Grammar in 1978 with Japan.

So when Monsieur Bernuchon presented Ms Thornquist with The Order of Academic Palms and she was given the rank of "Chevalier of the Academic Laurels", she was totally overwhelmed.

"I felt so honoured but thought I didn't really deserve it," Ms Thornquist admitted.

She was even more humbled when her colleague and friend Monsieur Bernuchon told the assembly, "Ms Thornquist has always known how to make the theory of language into a living reality and has encouraged communication and human contact.

"She has always known that establishing friendships and experiencing common ground as well as differences, is an important part of

understanding how we may live amicably in a troubled world."

Ms Thornquist fell passionately in love with French in high school and studied the language at university, along with German and Japanese. Through her role as manager of the International Affiliate Schools Program, she turned that passion into something tangible, creating a learning experience that students could live instead of just study.

For the past 20 years, a group of students and two teachers from Lyc e Saint Paul in Angoul me and Brisbane Girls Grammar have traded places for two weeks. Angoul me is located in Southern France and has a population of approximately 100,000. Like many European cities there is an Old and New town, but luckily for the French students from Australia, their exchange school is in the beautiful old section



Clockwise from top left: View from the top in Angoulême; Ms Thornquist receives her award from Monsieur Joel Bernuchon; BGGS in Angoulême; students from Lycee Saint Paul visit Brisbane Girls Grammar School; BGGS students exploring in Paris

on top of the hill. Part of the old ramparts still stand and a cathedral built in 1100 AD towers nearby.

“It’s a unique experience because they aren’t going away with family or necessarily friends and it’s certainly not a sleepover or a hotel,” Ms Thornquist said.

“They actually do have to wake that first morning with an unknown family and a less than well known language, and there are lots of challenges. So it’s an interesting place for the girls who have come from flash, modern Brisbane to find themselves. The last week of the trip is spent exploring Paris.”

So how does Angoulême feel about their Australian connection? According to Ms Thornquist, they love it when Brisbane Girls Grammar comes to town.

“The townsfolk are lovely to the girls and just so welcoming and helpful,” she said. “This seeps back (to Brisbane) to the girls who didn’t go or don’t even study French, as there is a real sharing experience and that’s what makes the French connection such a powerful part of the language learning here.”

The Principal of Lycée Saint Paul is keen on promoting an ongoing relationship with Brisbane Girls Grammar and the school’s

teachers singing the Australian students’ praises.

In fact the exchange program with France is so successful, many of Year 8 Brisbane Girls Grammar students, the school’s first year, enrol in French with the explicit intent of going on the now legendary study tour to France in Years 10 or 11.

In recent years, students not learning French have been allowed to go on the study tour and billeted with a family that speaks English. Also, when the French students visit, they are billeted with a variety of the school’s families.

For the students who take part in the exchange and live and learn in a different culture and language, it is a life-changing experience; one that Ms Thornquist believes creates international and generational friendships.

“One girl who went on the first exchange 20 years ago is still in touch with her host family and last year the host family of another girl came over to Brisbane for a visit,” she added.

Ms Thornquist has been to Angoulême at least 10 times and is greeted by name as she wanders along its narrow cobbled streets. She is content in the knowledge that her lifelong passion with all things French has not only inspired her students, it has broken down barriers and created life long bonds of friendship between families in Australia and France.

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