

Math in two worlds

Hungarian and Ridgefield teachers exchange places

by Jake Kara
Press Staff

Mathematics might be a universal language, but it's not always taught the same way.

Two teachers, from Ridgefield High School and a small Hungarian boarding school, who traded teaching positions for the year, are finding that out.

Ten-year RHS math teacher Monica Housen, her husband, two sons and daughter are mid-way through their year in Balatonalmadi, Hungary. They live on Lake Balaton, central Europe's largest freshwater lake, sometimes known as "the Hungarian Sea."

The swap is sponsored by the Fulbright Teacher Exchange. For Ms. Housen, this is her second Fulbright exchange. She spent 1997-98 in Latvia. Fulbright programs are among the world's more prestigious academic honors, with 43 alumni having received Nobel prizes and 78 having won Pulitzers. The most widely known Fulbrights are one-year fellowships for graduating college seniors and graduate students to study abroad. But the teacher exchange is also well established and respected.

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Ridgefield High School teacher Monica Housen at Fisherman's Bastion overlooking the Danube River in Budapest, Hungary, where she is spending a year teaching math, with husband Tom and sons Hayden and Reilly and daughter Monica.

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There, Ms. Housen is teaching at the small, competitive Bilingual School in the stead of Zsuzsanna Domel, who moved to New York with her husband, son and daughter, to teach at Ridgefield High School.

For Ms. Housen, the move to Hungary has meant getting used to a more formal culture, but in the high-performing school, and her comfortable, gas-heated row-house apartment, she is making herself at home.

"I'm used to teaching those high-level students," Ms. Housen said. Before RHS, she taught at The Gunnery, a prep school in Washington, Conn.

Her children attend a Hungarian school, but she and her husband home-school them a few hours per day as well, since they don't speak the language.

Ms. Domel moved to Ms. Housen's New York state house, where her husband stays during the day until Ms. Domel comes home from

work with the car.

"He's like Mr. Mom now," she said with a chuckle.

In the afternoons, he does some tutoring, which helps to cure the cabin fever.

People walk more in Hungary, where gas costs between three and four times what it does here.

Ms. Domel, who now commutes 45 minutes from Ms. Housen's house in New York state, misses walking her children home from school, chatting with them along the way and maybe stopping off for ice cream.

Ms. Housen, who is used to driving whenever she runs out for groceries, hasn't adopted the walk-everywhere mentality that is pervasive in Hungary, but her family does have a fuel-efficient car.

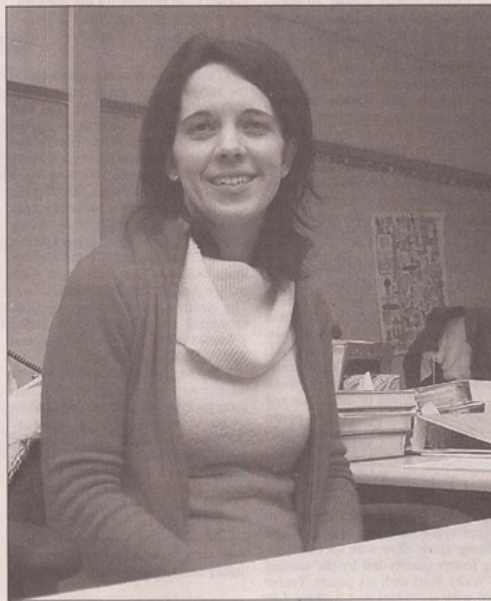
"We have an Opel Astra — I hadn't ever heard of an Opel before," Ms. Housen said. "We bought that when we first got here."

However, they couldn't register it without a license plate marker identifying it as being owned by a non-citizen — something that didn't sit well with them.

"We actually had to ask a Hungarian to register the car in his name," she said. "So we own the car but it is registered in somebody else's name, which apparently is legal here."

The cultural differences Ms. Housen and Ms. Domel mention are relatively small.

People are more formal in Hungary, Ms. Housen said. She's had to get used to not keeping her hands in her pockets and standing up when speaking at meetings.



Jake Kara

Hungarian math teacher Zsuzsanna Domel is spending a year teaching at Ridgefield High School in part of a Fulbright Teacher Exchange.

Ms. Domel also reports that people are less formal here. Her RHS students greet her differently than students would in Hungary.

"In Hungary, they say, good morning, good afternoon, good evening. Here they say hi, hello. I don't say it's not respectful — it's just different."

Ms. Domel speaks English, so the language has not been a problem for her, but her seven-year-old daughter who studied French as a second language of choice had one upsetting

experience at the school she attends in New York.

"She came home crying," said Ms. Domel. It turns out, her daughter had been assigned to "draw and color a picture."

"She didn't know the word 'draw,' so she used Google translator," and came up with "not win nor lose... She was shocked."

There are plenty of differences in the the schools. Ms. Domel has moved from a 350-student school with selective admissions to a public school. Ms. Housen has gone from

one of 18 math teachers to one of two.

Though it is a public school, the 350-student Bilingual School, compared to Ridgefield's 1,300-student high school, is more like an American private school. Students have to apply to get in, and they board there during the week, going home on weekends. Admission is not based on geography as it is here, where students go to the high school in their town.

There are more demands on teachers outside of the classroom at RHS, Ms. Domel said. There are more emails and meetings and rules, such as that teachers have to stay until the end of the day whether they have classes or not. When she had a parent-teacher conference at her children's school after she had finished teaching for the day, "I had to ask permission to leave my 'no class,'" she said.

Ms. Housen prefers the RHS rule. In Hungary, she ends up leaving earlier but working more at home.

The actual teaching of math varies quite a bit between the two schools.

"In Hungary, students are never allowed to use note cards — never, ever," said Ms. Domel. That was top among her list of what surprised her about teaching math in the United States. Also, she said, "in Hungary we always give open ended questions in math, but here I can see a lot of multiple choice questions, where students can guess the answer."

"They do much more difficult concepts" in Hungary, said Ms. Housen in a Skype

interview, adding that some topics that are common here are not taught in high school there, but the curriculum is more in depth.

"It's been eye-opening for me," she said of the differences in how math is taught in the two countries. The topics are not in the same order as they are here, and they are taught more fluidly throughout the course of a year. "It's much more integrated here."

"Algebra 1 is taught in maybe eighth or ninth grade" in the U.S., Ms. Housen said. "Here that is taught as a 12th grade concept, but students have taken trigonometry."

Ms. Domel doesn't like the comparatively rigid definitions of each subject within math that is typical here.

"Sometimes I feel I just teach the top things and don't get a chance to get to the deep things," she said.

While the Bilingual School's math courses are more challenging, not all of the same offerings are available at the high school level in Hungary. Differentiation and integration, which are fundamental to calculus, as well as statistics, are not taught until the college level there.

Ms. Housen said she's excited to bring what she's learned about teaching math back to Ridgefield, but she said she can't say yet how her experience might inform her and the department's teaching.

"We can kick up the level of some of our courses... I don't think the whole course would need to be harder — I think it could be isolated challenging questions."