

German exchange student will miss American life



Steven Rondio (right) congratulates Malachi Schweitzer after his last class at Heartland Luther High School. Rondio, an exchange student from Berlin, is leaving June 11 and said he'll miss the friends he has made.

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When Steven Rondio returns to Berlin, Germany, next month he knows what he wants to do first — eat a currywurst.

The sausage dish is famous in Berlin and Rondio has missed it while living in Grand Island.

The 16-year-old has been a student at Heartland Lutheran High School since August. He will be returning to his parents in Germany on June 11 to finish his last two years of high school.

The departure means having to say good-bye to friends, American football, the YMCA, Nebraska corn, Wal-Mart and all-sports channels on TV.

“I could watch that every day,” he said with a smile.

Rondio, who is one of four exchange students at Heartland Lutheran, will also miss the school’s small classes. The school has 60 to 70 students compared to the 500 at his Berlin high school. Teachers in Germany are stricter and there is less one-on-one attention, he said.

“Here, I can sit on the floor in one class,” he said. “It’s more relaxed.”

He’ll also miss the Tuesday/Thursday chapel services at Heartland Lutheran and the Sunday services at Trinity Lutheran Church.

“I didn’t really go to church that often in Germany,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot about God’s word.”

His host mother, Alice Bartlett, believes very strongly in the Christian education system. She and Rondio have devotions and attend church together, things she hopes make him feel at home.

“It’s been absolutely wonderful,” she said of her experience with Rondio. “There have been no problems.”

Rondio is the fourth exchange student she’s had in four years. Bartlett, a widow, said having the teens in her home helps fill a void and gives her a good reason to “get up in the morning.”

Bartlett feels very responsible for the students while they are here. She also said Rondio’s parents are very supportive of

him.

“It takes awhile to get to know him but once you do he’s a lot of fun,” she said.

During his time in Nebraska, Rondio said he’s learned to be more responsible and has had to do more things for himself. He is an only child so his parents are usually there for him, he said.

He’s also gotten to know Grand Island fairly well. The city is small enough people know each other. In Berlin, a city of 3.5 million, there are places he’s never even been.

When Rondio set out to be an exchange student, he submitted an application to the Education First Foundation for Foreign Study outlining requests and requirements. He wanted to go to an American school or town with a golf program and he requested a southern state. He got the golf but not the south.

“They called and asked me if I was okay with Nebraska and I said sure,” he said. “I didn’t know much about Nebraska. I’d maybe heard the name. I’d heard more about the coasts so I’ve learned a lot about mid-America and farms.”

Rondio — who’d been to the U.S. before on vacation — prepared for his move by looking Nebraska up on the Internet.

“Google maps,” he said with a laugh.

After spending two weeks at a prep camp in Boston, Rondio arrived in Grand Island. One of the first things he noticed about the city was the German roots. Many of the streets have German names, he said.

“I noticed that right away,” he said.

Rondio, who golfs with a sports club in Berlin, is on Heartland Lutheran’s golf team. Their district meet is today at Indianhead Golf Course and he hopes the meet will lead to a team trip to the state golf tournament.

“I’ve never missed a meet,” Bartlett said.

In addition to learning a lot in the last school year, Rondio has shared information about Germany with his classmates and teammates. He’s encouraged some friends to visit Berlin and said they will find a country rich with history.

“And they don’t need to know German,” he said. “Many people in Berlin speak English. They may not speak it well but we’ll get by.”