

## **Toot Your Own Horn!**

Jo Ellen Sandburg (emerita)  
Barrington Township Middle School, IL  
Currently, Adult Education (FL)  
Co-Chair, AATF Tête-à-Tête Collegial Sharing Program

“Oh, the good old days!” Many of us look back wistfully on our pasts with memories of less stressful careers and life styles. We catch ourselves saying, “It was simpler then,” with the nostalgic notion that somehow that was good.

Those bygone days were not just “good”; they were great for me as a beginning French teacher. One fundamental reason was that almost all private colleges and universities were requiring at least 2 or more years of foreign language for admission. Nearly 80% of our district’s incoming freshmen had signed up for one of the languages being offered at the time: French, German, Latin, Russian, and Spanish. We had 3 fulltime French teachers! There were no worries about where students would come from, how we could convince them to sign up for French, if our programs would be cut, or if we would lose our jobs or be transferred into teaching another subject. There were enough foreign language students to ensure our large group of professionals.

Then the “good old days” vanished. Many state, college, university, and district foreign language requirements were eliminated. Some foreign language teachers left to find other careers. We who remained had to fight to keep our classes filled to the required minimum number. Foreign language teachers were being transferred into their “minor” degree areas (and in one case into study hall supervisions). Each spring after enrollment figures were released, we anxiously awaited the numbers to discover whether we would still have programs and jobs to return to the next fall. I came to the tough realization that if I didn’t do something “*tout de suite*” to bring French into the spotlight, we would lose even more students to other languages or to courses of study in the arts, technology, and various electives.

### ***Influencing policy makers***

As an **advocate** for our French programs, I set out to influence those who make the policy decisions. They needed to recognize the worth of French programs, the successes, the needs and interests of our students. Measures that would support and grow our program had to be promoted. As French enrollments declined nearly every year, we realized we had to act quickly by vigorously promoting what we believed.

My personal conviction was that if I wanted to maintain or grow the numbers in our French courses, I would have to add one more task to what I already did for and with my students in order for them to find success and happiness in their French studies. Public opinion needed to be enlightened, educated, and influenced—yes, I had to influence! I began by thinking about all the “extras” that our French students were involved, about which the public should be informed. A somewhat simplistic solution for a complicated time: **PUBLICITY!**

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When my students performed a simulated Tour de France on tricycles with French sponsors and French shirts, with the Cultural Attaché Adjoint as our Master of Ceremonies, I called the district's public relations liaison, sent invitations to all parents and administrators, alerted the local and Chicago newspapers, and submitted articles and photos to our school, PTA, and district newsletters. When our Tour de France teams appeared on the front page of the weekly edition of the local newspaper, the students felt like stars.

We continued the publicity blast with articles and photos of our Coupe du Monde (World Cup), the French Fashion Shows that we presented for 800 parents, the Waiters' Races, the cooking contests and demonstrations, our marches in the "JUST SAY NO" parades in the village with our French chants and slogans "*contre la drogue*," the trips to l'Aventure Française immersion camp, the groups of 36 eighth grade students who went to France each summer, the Mardi Gras celebrations with zydeco bands playing at school and many Cajun/Créole gourmet delights, the after-school tutoring programs using high school and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to help the beginning French students, French cheering sections at athletic events with all our cheers in French ("*Un, Deux, Trois: Rah! Rah! Rah! Un, Deux, Trois: Va! Va! Va!*") and all of us dressed in the French colors of "*bleu/blanc/rouge*," inviting business members of the community to talk to our students about how important foreign language study was in their careers, taking students to the Milwaukee Folk Fairs and to Global Fests sponsored by our state foreign language council, the tours of the Chicago River and buildings by boat, in French, led by the Cultural Attaché Adjoint once again, the interdisciplinary units we did with Home Ec, the art and history departments, math, science, and language arts; the video our French students were asked to make for the Bicentenary and the Grand Concours in which we had winners for 20 consecutive years. There were articles written, photos submitted, telephone calls made to news outlets, parental involvement that had to be secured. Everything takes time, energy, and organization. After doing everything that I could without help for several years, I learned, and subsequently asked for adult communications volunteers for each class and cultural activity.

### ***Getting the news out***

There are several methods for engaging those volunteers to help get the news disseminated about the experiences within and outside the French classroom. The first day of the new quarter, I sent home a letter that explained the expectations, goals and objectives, the topics and materials that would be covered, homework requirements, grading information, cultural events that we would be participating in, and lastly asking for parent/grandparent volunteers to help with cooking in class, contests, guest speakers, sporting events, hat and mask making, French art and music programs, holiday celebrations, and travel to festivals, camps, contests and field trips. One of our most popular volunteers was a grandmother who had lived in France and who came to read French stories to my 6<sup>th</sup> graders. All 32 of them sat on the floor around the base of her chair mesmerized by her storytelling techniques and the hilarious books she brought to the class.

The key volunteer was the parent who would be in charge of all the public relations for the class. That person would help put out news to administrators, school board, school and district newsletters, and all news publications in the surrounding area. I had several parents for each class who returned their forms stating that they would like to be involved in our activities throughout the year. It is much better to keep the same parents for the entire school year as they

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get to know what you expect on the “special” days, they get to know the students in the class, and you get to know their level of success in publishing the news.

Another method for finding volunteers is to request them at Back-to-School night. I passed around a form after I had explained all that we would be doing that year so that volunteers could sign up using their email and phone numbers. In addition, at that open house, I had my home phone number written on the blackboard and on the form so that parents could call me at any time with a concern or recommendation, or to volunteer for an activity.

A third way to obtain volunteers is through the activities sent home to be completed. Many of my parents were so interested in all the cultural activities and oral sketches their students were working on at home that they would call asking to be included in the fun. One mother even asked if she could come in and learn French in class with her child. After I had checked with her child about his wishes and with our administration for permission, she sat in with us (and helped on several occasions) for an entire semester.

An additional way to make the publicity job easier is to have a public relations volunteer for the entire foreign language department. We were lucky to have a fantastic volunteer who was very involved in several of our school programs. Each language would give her their news once per month so that every foreign language would have representation in the PTO newsletter. Those columns helped support the firm belief that learning another language is necessary, valuable, and fun.

Lastly, we asked the high school for volunteer French students to come to the middle school to assist with our large classes. Several seniors came to our beginning classes during their “free” periods and helped with make-up work, one-on-one exercises, group work, and cultural activities. My students loved having these “cool dudes” instead of the “*Vieille Madame*” energizing the class.

### ***Pushing French***

With all the programs that we participated in and events we performed in the community, we still had to convince the parents that French was THE language to learn when they were asked to make the decision about what elective to enroll their child in for the following year. To have more contact with those parents, I helped my students make Valentines in French for all our school and district administrators, cooks, nurse, custodians, school board members, and parents or other family members. When Mother’s Day drew near, we spent an entire class period with paper, colored markers and pens, glue, glitter (yes, the parent volunteer and I vacuumed and scrubbed desks), and we sent sentimental poems in French to mothers, step-mothers, and grandmothers. How those women appreciated the effort of their students who then translated at home the messages of love and appreciation! Those who received the special cards each year shared their joy with neighbors and friends. They had become **advocates** for our French program by sharing news with others in the community about how involved their children were in using their French beyond textbook exercises.

At the end of each quarter, I sent home a letter listing all the textbook-type learning we had accomplished plus all the cultural activities offered. Parents were asked to sign the letter and return it to me so that I knew they were aware of how much had been asked and had been accomplished. Many parents wrote notes back to tell me how much fun they were having at home learning the latest French tongue twisters, proverbs, songs, cultural tidbits, etc., that we did every day. Many of them were very surprised by all the material and topics that had been covered. They told me the lists they received at home gave them good conversational opportunities with their children, especially when the student could teach the parent something from the list. Many of them told neighbors and other community members about the interesting and rewarding activities their children were experiencing in French, thus extending the publicity endeavor.

### *Saving language programs*

One of the most challenging tasks of **advocating** for our students and programs occurred when our school board decided they were going to cut some languages and classes from our curriculum to save money. Parents were alerted (by word of mouth) that the school board was planning to slash courses and personnel. Over 600 parents and former students were present at that school board meeting to witness to the joys and benefits of studying French and other foreign languages. Our former high school students who were home for this meeting were strong proponents of what French had done for them at the university level. The school board members were awed by the turnout and by the energy and positive comments of support. Our programs were saved.

**Advocating** and promoting our students and programs take time and energy when we already are doing so much just to survive in this difficult environment. A principal action for maintaining and growing our French programs is to make the community more aware of how successful and delighted our students are with what we provide for them. Parents, administrators, PTA newsletters, district public relations departments, local and regional newspapers, radio and television stations should all be considered when you are witnessing to the joys of learning French. *Toot* the advocate's horn; "*allons-y ensemble!*"