

# The Northland’s language gem

It’s not that easy to learn another language when you are well past your schooling.

For five years, I’ve watched my husband, Rod Walli, learn Finnish, his parents’ first language. Motivated by the desire to speak with non-English-speaking cousins of his generation in Finland, he plunged into every route he could find.

Down the road from us, at our Villa Vista-Cardinal Court for elders, he convened a Finnish language table, learning from those who had spoken it as children at home. More recently, he’s been watching films in Finnish with no English subtitles. Later this month, he’ll be spending a week at Concordia Language Villages near Bemidji, his third or fourth adult immersion.

Inspired by his diligence, I decided to improve my Spanish. I hadn’t spoken since college, except to navigate (poorly) during short trips to Spain, Peru, Chile and Mexico.

Last week I joined El Lago del Bosque, the Spanish village at Concordia. A dozen young counselors from Mexico, Argentina and Spain lavished their energy, smarts, and patience on our group of adult learners — about 18 of us. Every day, we spent four hours in class, spread over three time slots.

Classes were grouped around three savory meals, each from a Spanish-speaking culture. Before dinner, a counselor presented on topics such as gambling addiction in Argentina; Basque and Catalan independence movements; flora and fauna of Latin America and the history of emeralds in Columbia. The re-



On the Mark  
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maining hours were interspersed with activities we elected (cooking, doll- and jewelry-making, dancing, sports, hiking, etc.).

In my group were two younger women — both married with children — and one man. Our teacher Caspi, a vibrant young woman from the Spanish Basque Country, worked hard to help us speak fluently and learn grammar. Besides drills, we played games, and wrote about short topics Caspi chose.

I’ll admit that I’m not that good anymore at memorizing grammar rules. Like children, I now learn best by listening and attempting to speak. Many, many words came back to me, buried in my memory. I could convey meaning, if imperfectly. By day three, I pledged publicly to speak only Spanish all day!

The Concordia Language Villages are a northern Minnesota gem. I sat down with Kristen Addison, Concordia’s dean of Spanish Academic Year Programs, on the final morning. She related the Villages’ history.

In the early 1960s, Drs. Jerry Hokobaho and Charlie Mayo, working on a U.S. Air Force base in Germany, taught American kids German. They discovered that the children were learning best by playing. Why not, they thought, create a little Germany here, in Minnesota? Hooking up with Concordia College, they

taught future German teachers on site in Alexandria, Minn. Their German slots filled by 1964; they then added programs in Spanish, Russian and French.

The Concordia team decided to expand, adding languages and building a village for each. They found a patron in Pablo Hoff, who had first come as an 8-year-old to Concordia’s language camp and returned thereafter as counselor, teacher, dean and instructor, where he met his future wife, Nuria. With royalties that Nuria earned from her work as one of the first photographers for Spanish textbooks, the two donated generously to buy the land in northern Minnesota.

The Spanish village, Addison explains, is less about heritage and more about contemporary Spanish-speaking culture.

“Everything we do has to have a cultural component,” he said. Before every meal, for instance, a counselor explains the dishes we are about to eat, their ingredients, and what country they are from.

“We try to pull verb formats and tenses into activities,” he added.

This includes the more active hours. I’ll admit, I didn’t realize this while I was trying to master a tango step. But since I learn best by hearing and not reading or memorizing, it was stealthy work for me!

The counselors are outstanding. Fun, hard-working, creative. Applicants from all over the Spanish-speaking world have earned hard-won spots by documenting their education and work experience, and in face-to-face interviews via the



Staff members at Language Camp put on a “telenovela” for campers. *Contributed photo*

internet. They work well together with lots of mutual respect and laughter.

Every evening for five nights, we were treated to a “telenovela” our counselors created and performed for us. About an unhappy rich family, with money problems, infidelities and murder, each episode provoked much laughter. The acting was as scintillating as the script, heightened by lights and snippets of music.

The Concordia Language Villages program works for

campers at any age and any level of exposure. There are summer camps for kids, for families, and for college students. Whatever your prior exposure, learning a new language is a very powerful experience. It will improve your English, too. And you’ll have a lot of fun along the way.

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[administrative] positions,” Carman said in response.

Board chair LaRae Lehto pointed out that the district has existing contracts with the superintendent and both principals, and noted that Carman would have to agree to any sharing arrangement.

Carman said she was aware that some districts have chosen to share a superintendent.

“I think you have to find the right district that has a need,” she said. “Would I be open to that conversation? Yeah.”

Hagenah also did not reject the suggestion, but noted that the board would need to do a lot of fact finding first, adding that they looked into sharing a superintendent when the district was in statutory operating debt years back.

“We talked to schools that had shared a superintendent in the past, and it wasn’t a perfect picture,” he said. “It also took a certain individual to do it.”

School superintendents are typically the highest-paid school district staff. Carman’s 2016 contract provided a salary of \$101,000 plus benefits for three years, and is set to expire June 30, 2019.

In a somewhat controversial move last fall, members

of the school board approved a new contract for Carman effective July 2019 through July 1, 2022, eight months before her contract was up for renewal. According to the Oct. 15, 2018 meeting minutes, Hagenah motioned to approve that contract, supported by LaRae Lehto. Board members Sue Karp and Julianne Emerson also voted “yes,” while Chmielewski voted “no.” That contract pays Carman a salary of \$107,171 for the 2019-20 school year, \$108,243 for 2020-21 and \$109,325 for 2021-22.

The 2016-19 contract provides for a lump sum payment in the gross amount of \$50,000 in case the district consolidates with another school district and Carman does not continue on as an employee of the consolidated district. The 2019-2022 contract offers the same lump sum payment for severance in case of consolidation or dissolution of the school district.

In response to a question from board member Ann Gustafson about administrative staff ratio, Lehto said she’d done some research on the Minnesota Department of Education’s website, which showed Wrenshall on the low end for Carlton County districts, with 2 percent of staff classed as administrative, and Esko with a high of more

than 4 percent. Carlton was above 3 percent but below 4 percent, she said.

Lehto said she doesn’t support changes to administration right now, although she might in the long run.

“As we’re talking about the future of the district and potentially making a big change or recommendation for the future ... we may have to lean heavily on our administration in the short term,” she said, adding that she didn’t think it was prudent to make administrative changes while the district is in a time of potential transition.

Chmielewski was adamant that cutting administrative costs also be on the table.

“For cost savings, certainly we could have not hired another principal and continued with the sharing of principal duties in the meantime,” she said, referring to the hiring of secondary principal Barry Fischer. “I completely understand the idea of pairing and sharing a superintendent would have to be looked into, as much as every other option on [the sheet of recommended cuts].”

Carman said money gained by the sale of school district buses to 4.0 Student Services last summer, which generated nearly \$250,000, would also be part of future budget discussions.

## One football team for Carlton, Wrenshall?

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A historical sports co-operative between schools in Carlton and Wrenshall could be approved as early as Monday by district school boards. Football coaches and activities directors from both schools made presentations to the public in Carlton and the Wrenshall board Wednesday night on the prospect of the two schools teaming up in football. The idea comes on the heels of a partnership in cross-country last fall that was deemed successful.

“I’m 100-percent for this,” said Wrenshall football and activities director Jeremy Zywicki as he addressed the Wrenshall board at its committee of the whole meeting. He had just come Carlton, where head coach Jason Crane and activities director Ben Midge joined him. Midge and Crane also met with the Wrenshall board.

Crane said Carlton students are all on board with playing with Wrenshall. He said waiting each year hoping participation numbers will go up isn’t sustainable for either program. “There is no right time to do this,” he said, stressing that the time is now.

The problem for both schools has been in fielding enough players.

They play in the nine-man division and still have trouble filling rosters. Zywicki said he had only eight players in the final game of the season last year due to injuries. He started with just 14. Crane said he had 19 players, down from 29 at the start of the season.

Both schools have, off and on over the years, had to abandon varsity play because there aren’t enough upperclassmen. Younger players aren’t ready for the speed and size of varsity play, Zywicki said. More players means more sustainability, he said. “And we wouldn’t be putting kids in harm’s way. We want success but we want kids safe.”

The co-op would put the team in 11-man play, though with schedules already set for next year, it would play nine-man teams but be forced to move into 11-man competition for playoffs. The schedule would include other Class A teams like Barnum, East Central, Hinckley-Finlayson and Braham.

The coaches have talked about some details but much remains up in the air as they wait for school boards to approve the co-op. The varsity team would likely practice in Wrenshall and play games in Carlton. New uniforms would incorporate the blue scheme from Carlton and the orange from Wrenshall.

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