



Above: St. Paul's School students Casey Hahne, left, and Brock Drews gather around Ronald Soderstrom Tuesday as Soderstrom reads a card from his Australian pen pal, Peter, at the church. The students have been e-mailing pen pals in Australia. **Right:** Andrew Robitaille plays a didgeridoo at the church as his wife, Amanda, watches.
 Laury Graves/Commercial-News photos

Australian opens kids' eyes

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DANVILLE — It's the other side of the world over there. The people talk a little different and, of course, Christmas time down under is like July on this side of the globe.

But not everything is different in Australia.

Everybody doesn't have a pet koala. In fact it's illegal to have one in your home without a license. And the people don't walk on the ceiling like it's the floor, either.

"I don't think American kids know much about what goes on outside the United States because that's all they see on TV and the movies," said Laura Hensgen, computer teacher at St. Paul's School.

Her fifth- through eighth-graders are receiving personal lessons in geography and sociology from a school in Australia.

St. Paul's students have

been e-mailing pen pals at Good News Lutheran School in Brisbane, Australia, for two months.

"This was a chance for them to see how kids their own age grow up," Hensgen said.

Tuesday afternoon, St. Paul's students viewed some Australian artifacts and heard a real Australian accent.

Good News Lutheran computer teacher Andrew Robitaille and his wife, Amanda, who is from Australia, took time during their American vacation to visit with St. Paul's youngsters.

Originally from Ohio, Robitaille did his student teaching in Australia. The schools there are on summer break now, so he's visiting his parents in his hometown.

St. Paul's students saw a slide show about the people and history of Australia. They also sang an Australian version of "Jingle Bells," with down-under slang in each



verse and a chorus about spending the holiday beneath a scorching sun.

And they listened to Andrew Robitaille play the didgeridoo.

The long, black wooden tube resonated with a deep vibrato.

"You have to vibrate your lips, like this," he said, demonstrating.

The students mimicked him, flubbing their lips in a silly chorus.

"And you have to press pretty firmly so the air doesn't escape."

Robitaille made the sounds of a dingo howling and a kookaburra, an Australian bird, laughing — to the children's delight.

"I still laugh when I hear a kookaburra," Robitaille said.

The children laughed, too. But they were learning.

"They're learning about Australian animals and the land, imports, exports, the economy ...," Hensgen said.

But most of all, they're learning people are pretty much the same.

"They were shocked to find out that they (and the Australian kids) like the same things," Hensgen said. "And they have Xboxes and PS2s (video game platforms) there."

The Australian children weren't quite as culture shocked.

"They probably thought all Americans walk around with a cell phone and drive a fancy car," Robitaille said. "Talking to the (American) kids helped clear up a lot of myths."

And the communication bridges the distance between two classrooms a world apart.

"Just open their eyes to how other people in other parts of the world live and people in different cultures have different priorities ... to just open their mind and open their eyes," Robitaille said. "The way you live isn't the only way things happen."