



Rick Danz/The News-Gazette

**Andrew Robitaille, a computer teacher in Australia, speaks to a group of St. Paul's School students Monday at St. Paul's Church in Danville.**

# Kids get sample of Australia

■ E-mail correspondence teaches Danville school about life 'down under'

**By TRACY MOSS**

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**DANVILLE —** The next time seventh-grader April Cahill hears "Jingle Bells," she'll be thinking about dashing through the Australian bush in a rusty truck rather than the snow in a one-horse open sleigh.

"That was hilarious," Cahill said after hearing the Australian version of "Jingle Bells" during an assembly at St. Paul's School on Tuesday afternoon.

Andrew Robitaille, a computer teacher in Brisbane, Australia, and his wife Amanda visited St. Paul's on Tuesday and played a recording of "Jingle Bells" the way they sing it down under, where there's no snow for a sleigh ride and people sing about "Christmas in Australia on a scorching summer's day ..."

Robitaille is an Ohio native who traveled to Australia to student teach after college and met his wife, an Australian native. The Robitailles now live in Brisbane, where he teaches a computer class at a private Christian elementary school similar to St. Paul's.

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# Australia

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More than two months ago, St. Paul's computer teacher Laura Hensgen registered with an online service that locates e-mail pen pals for students. A few days later, she was matched with Robitaille, and their students began e-mailing each other on a weekly basis.

Australian schools are currently on summer break, so the Robitailles decided to visit family in Ohio and, while in the United States, take a detour to Danville to meet the students they've been writing.

"It's neat being an ambassador of Australia since I'm American," said Robitaille, who, along with his wife, spent more than an hour with the St. Paul's third- through fifth-graders, giving them a slice of Australia through a computer presentation about his school and Australian life.

Amanda Robitaille joked that visiting with the St. Paul's students was an ego boost.

"I felt like a celebrity," she said, adding that it was also rewarding to realize that the St. Paul's students had learned from writing their "e-pals" and

had an interest in Australia.

In addition to "Jingle Bells," the Robitailles taught the students about art and slang in their country as well as famous Australians such as actor Mel Gibson. Robitaille even played the didgeridoo — a musical instrument made from a hollow log that makes sounds synonymous with Australia.

The Robitailles also passed out Christmas cards from the Brisbane students to their e-mail pen pals.

April has been e-mailing two girls who are in Robitaille's classes, and she looks forward to any correspondence from them, including her Christmas card.

She said most people don't know much about Australians, "except for their accents." But April and her friend and classmate, Sara Carnaghi, 12, can now rattle off a multitude of information about Australian animals, culture, athletic activities and their new friends.

Sara said her e-pal asked her what snow is like.

"I told her it was kind of like marshmallows, fluffy, but sometimes it gets brown," Sara said. "I think this is something

we will remember forever."

Robitaille and Hensgen said the project has been wonderful, teaching the students so much about each other, their countries and their cultures.

Amanda Robitaille said it's good for the Australian students to learn more about the United States than what they see in the movies and television. And Hensgen said American students often have no idea what it's like outside the U.S. The e-pal project broadens their understanding, and Hensgen said the visit from the Robitailles reinforces that.

"It puts a face with it," she said.

Once the Australian students return to school next year, Robitaille and Hensgen plan to continue the correspondence between schools and students, and they're already planning additional interaction, not only through the computers, but also by sending care packages and videos to each other.

"It's exciting," Robitaille said.

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