

From Barcelona with love



Special to The Tribune

Six exchange students from Barcelona visited George Walton Academy as part of a new program encouraging cultural connections across the globe. Above, the six visited the World of Coke on one of their days off. Front row, from left, are Laia Gimenez, Ines Perez and Niki Medina. Back row, from left are Juan Camilo, Nicolas Gutierrez and Juan Pi.

Making an (ex)change

GWA | Students visit Monroe from Spain as part of new cultural exchange program

MONROE

By **Stephen Milligan**
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Navigating the strange new landscape of America and its different customs, Barcelona, Spain, freshman Juan Camilo pointed to many differences between his hometown and small-town Monroe across the Atlantic, but one of the first he noted involved local fast food restaurants.

“Refills,” Juan, 15, said. “In Spain, you have to pay for refills. Here, they’re free.”

That may have been one of the most minor differences between the two cultures, but it was nevertheless one of many Juan and his five fellow Spanish students have noticed in the past few weeks as transplanted pupils at George Wal-

ton Academy.

The six exchange students at GWA are the first batch of what school officials hope will be many to come as they work to build up their program of bringing in students from abroad and sending their own pupils out into the world.

“We have six ninth-grade students who are all here from Barcelona,” Femke Côté, director of global studies for GWA. “They’re here for about four weeks, each of them staying with a GWA family who has their own ninth grader. Those students who they stayed with will then head to Spain in April and stay with them for about three weeks.”

It all started last year with a visit from another student from the St. Paul’s School in Barcelona.

“They’re basically GWA in Europe,” Côté said. “We have similar enrollment, similar ideals and the

like. We started the connection between our schools last year through a family connection and now we’re working to grow that connection.”

Juan and his fellow exchange students — who all speak fluent English, which is taught as part of the curriculum at their school in Spain — have settled in with their host families and discovered the normalities, and the oddities, of living American style.

Juan said going from urban living in Barcelona to staying in a rural farm-style home in Monroe meant a bit of an adjustment.

“You look outside and there’s just nothing out there,” Juan said. “Except horses.”

It’s been more than fast food dining and the great outdoors, though. The six students have done a bit of sight-seeing, including a visit together to the World of Coke in Atlanta.

“I’ve visited a lot of places, like the Coke museum,” Juan said. “And I’ve done some shopping. I wanted to learn more about the United States and it’s been very interesting.”

Côté said she wants to expand the exchange offerings in the future and is already working out connections with places like Rome and South Africa, as well as a study abroad trip planned to the Galapagos Islands.

“You can’t just think locally anymore, like nothing matters outside of Monroe,” she said. “We want to develop our students as global citizens with cultural competency.”

Sometimes, though, that also means welcoming a student like Juan, who’s never had a free refill before and was pleased to meet so many friendly faces in Monroe, Georgia.

“People here are very nice,” Juan said. “I’ve had a lot of fun.”

Dan Dolan
George Walton Academy

The George Walton experience: character, community and opportunity

Imagine you’re 16 years old and your day begins with a stroll through a spectacular museum in Barcelona, studying masterpieces created by some of the greatest artists in the world. After a hands-on culinary lesson that concludes with a delicious almuerzo (lunch) of authentic Spanish cuisine, you and your classmates tour a cathedral where you discuss 15th century architecture and the Spanish Inquisition. Your day ends with a



captivating performance of Carmen at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. These are the moments that truly capture a student’s imagination and foster a lifelong love of learning.

We at George Walton Academy are excited to provide such opportunities for our students through our newly-established international school partnership with St. Paul’s School in Barcelona, Spain.

The George Walton Academy experience has three hallmarks: character, community and opportunity. Now that the school year is well underway, I would

like to highlight some of the new opportunities available to GWA students.

No two students are exactly alike, so why shouldn’t they have the opportunity to explore a wide variety of interests? We have launched several new initiatives to ensure we are more nimble, flexible, and attentive to the interests and needs of each of our learners. For example, we have added a new piano lab in our lower school, which allows for both individual and small group lessons during the day. Upper school students now choose from addi-

tional electives in English, science, history, art and PE. Yes, even PE! We now offer a two-track physical education program: one for life sports and one for athletic performance. Both are taught by a certified personal trainer and a physical therapist. We have expanded our options for learning environments and students can now take courses online, propose an independent study or participate in dual enrollment at one of the local universities.

We have also established a partnership in Asia to broaden our

reach and invite more international students to experience GWA. And we are collaborating with Duke University and Johns Hopkins University to develop a semester-long course in medical service, which will culminate with a trip and field study in Belize in 2019.

We are revamping our schedule to allow students more discretionary time during the day, offering them a low-risk environment in which to develop and improve their time management and self-advocacy skills. Specifically, we will encourage students to use this

time wisely to seek academic help from teachers and peer tutors, study independently during a proctored study hall, or capitalize on enrichment opportunities, such as listening to a talk and engaging in discussion with a guest speaker.

As we approach our 50th year, we remain committed to our hallmark of opportunity — simultaneously supporting students and encouraging them to explore the world and discover who they are.

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