

THE NORMANDY PEACE PROJECT

'A beautiful moment of understanding'

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T*his was the gap:* Thirty-nine students from three countries, separated by oceans, by language, by cultural stereotypes and by enduring WWII resentments. *This was the hope:* Unite as one group, for two weeks to perform a play of peace and reconciliation at the 70th Anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, in front of thousands.

In early June, 16 students from Friends Academy and Portledge flew to Normandy to meet up with French and German students and began what would become the undertaking of their lives.

"The project was structured so that we would have four days of 10-hour rehearsals," said Director of Arts Tracey Foster, who accompanied the students, along with dance teacher Kimo Kepano and technical director Michael Grant. "We needed to turn the three separate shows into one show."

Each group of students had worked from the same script and same ideas, but there was still the blending that had to happen.

Foster and Kepano devised collaborative and physical challenges for the students to help them overcome language and cultural barriers.

"Those were really hard days. But we could not have started building relationships with the French and Germans without sweating together," said senior Ryan Dobrin.



Performing "Overlord," a recreation of the Normandy invasion at a public sharing on May 19 at Friends.



TRACEY FOSTER/FRIENDS ACADEMY

American, German and French students perform "If We Build Peace Together" on Utah Beach in Normandy.

Slowly, the barriers of language and culture were toppled. "By the end of the second day, I felt like I had known these people all my life," said Portledge's Caroline Kriegstein.

Solidified as one group, the 39 students debuted "If We Build Peace Together" before an intimidating audience. "The first performance in front of the veterans was the most emotional," remembered junior Olivia Fine. "At the end, they were all standing up and clapping for us. We knew these people would only be around for so much longer."

Students performed two plays in over ten different venues, from inside grand theaters, to parks and WWII museums leading up to D-Day.

After a shared experience at a local

German cemetery, something changed forever. "Rudi, the German chaperone, started to tell his students and ours about his personal family story during WWII. How he waited to be liberated by the Americans, while simultaneously other family members fought against the U.S.," recalled Foster. "His students had never heard this story. One of our kids comforted a German boy who could not stop crying. Another German girl spontaneously began reciting "The Lord's Prayer" over all the unknown soldier's graves. That was a beautiful moment of understanding."

For FA students, the experience is still one that is hard to articulate. "I think I've changed in so many different ways – my work ethic, what I believe in," said Olivia. "It's so impossible to sum up," finished Ryan. "We've all learned so much – as performers, understanding historical perspectives, why we fight each other. It's definitely going to be an experience from which I will continue to learn."



French, American and German students sit side by side at rehearsal.