

Princeton Packet Article on Conversation Group

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Alliance Française fetes Gallic culture, language

By Philip Sean Curran
Staff Writer

Gail Bruno has loved the French language since she was a high school freshman.

"I do remember thinking I would hear my teacher speaking with seniors and thinking, 'Will I ever be able to do that,'" said the retired educator, who today helps lead a local group of like-minded people who share a love for things Gallic.

Turning 10 years old in 2016, Alliance Française of Princeton is a chapter of Alliance Française — an organization based in France that promotes the French culture and language around the world.

"We meet a lot of great people, and people bring their experiences," said Frances Wonnell, a co-president of the chapter along with Ms. Bruno.

The chapter has a conversation group that meets twice monthly, provides French instruction classes in small

groups for adults and children and seeks to either provide or inform its members about activities that might interest them. In addition, the organization celebrates Bastille Day in July and has a Christmas party, this year on Dec. 6.

Veronique Sigu, a native Frenchwoman who directs the Alliance's education programs, said "a beautiful thing" about the organization is how it "brings everything French from Princeton to you."

"I think we are growing. We seem to meet new people at each event," Ms. Bruno said.

Ms. Bruno said the conversation group — which meets between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on the second and the fourth Monday of each month at the café at McCaffrey's of Princeton — used to have as few as six or seven people. But attendance has doubled, she said. The session is split into French for one hour and then English for the other hour for French-speakers wanting to work on their English.



Staff photo by Philip Sean Curran

From left, Catherine Lery, Dave Winans and Gail Bruno at McCaffrey's café, where their discussion group meets.

"The conversation group is very low-key, very welcoming," she said.

Run by a board of volunteers, the group charges for membership, but education classes are open to anyone at a slightly higher fee than what members pay. Taught by native speakers, French classes

are geared for students of all ages and language proficiency who meet in small groups.

"And I think that's a big advantage of the Alliance Française," said Ms. Sigu, who has been teaching the language since she was a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1990s.

This part of New Jersey is home to a sizable French community. French expatriates are drawn to the greater Princeton region for jobs in the pharmaceutical industry and to a college town that has a European feel, Ms. Sigu said.

"They do gravitate to Princeton," she said. "It is

amazing when you walk the streets of Princeton, you hear people speaking French all the time."

In both cases, Ms. Bruno and Ms. Wonnell had the opportunity to immerse themselves in the French language as young women.

As a 19-year-old college student, Ms. Bruno worked as a nanny for a family in Switzerland for four months. The experience, she recalled, made "all the difference in the world."

"I had to speak (French) every day. Within one month, I was thinking in French, dreaming in French," she said.

Ms. Wonnell had a similar experience, working as a nanny for a large French family as a 16-year-old, "It was just weeks with a French family, weeks and weeks with nobody else around," she said. "I loved it."

"So from then on," she said, "I just loved the language."

For more information, visit the organization's website, www.allianceprinceton.com.

[Alliance Française of Princeton](http://www.allianceprinceton.com)