

Lives dedicated to teaching international students in Bonn



Irene Bolik, Director of IBIS and Year 1 teacher Simone Cormann.

Foto: Carol Kloeppel

03.11.2016 HEIDERHOF. A school director from Scotland and a British Year 1 teacher have been impacting the lives of international primary students for over three decades in Bonn.

The Independent Bonn International School (IBIS) is the “oldest and longest established international school” in Bonn according to its website. That would make Director Irene Bolik and Year 1 teacher Simone Cormann two of the longest-serving educators on the international scene in Bonn when it comes to primary schooling. Mrs. Bolik has been at the school for 35 years; she was made Deputy Head in 1990 and Director in 2002. Mrs. Cormann has been teaching in Class 1 for over 30 years at the school.

So what makes someone stay at a school for that long? “It’s the love of the school,” replies Mrs. Bolik without missing a beat. She initially came to Bonn from her native Scotland to teach English at Nicolaus Cusanus Gymnasium, a German secondary school in Bad Godesberg. After having subsequently landed at IBIS, she appears to have woven herself into the school fabric, devoting all her time and energy to the school. Simone Cormann planned to stay in Bonn for only two years but she liked the school so much - here she is three decades later. She has helped launch the school careers of thousands of young

international students. Mrs. Cormann is British and has a twin sister who is also teaching in an international school in England. Both women have German husbands.

Irene Bolik and Simone Cormann are both witnesses to Bonn history, having personally welcomed Prince Charles and Princess Diana to IBIS in 1987 when they came for the opening of a new school wing. Back then, Bonn was still the capital of Germany and the British Ambassador was in charge of the school, which was then called the “British Embassy Prep School” or BEPS. Mrs. Cormann recalls Diana as “stunning but very shy” and adds, “She gracefully accepted the paper flowers that my class made for her.” Mrs. Bolik took her to a classroom where children presented her with books they had made in both English and German. “Security was amazing” and “the noise of the shutters from the cameras was so loud,” remembers Mrs. Cormann.

Of course they have both seen changes over the years. The biggest challenge came when all the embassies moved to Berlin and the student population dwindled. Four international schools were to join together as one to survive, but BEPS decided to go it alone and call itself “Independent.” It wanted to keep the family atmosphere that it had thrived on in the past. The school is no longer purely British of course; today they see an increasing number of dual-nationality children, many of them bi- or trilingual. Around 38 different countries are represented at the primary school today.

Teaching children who speak different languages and who come from different cultures can lead to some misunderstandings. Mrs. Cormann asked two children to shake hands to make up after a disagreement. Instead of shaking hands with each other, they shook their hands at each other and thought it was a funny way of making up.

Both educators say the children haven’t changed all that much over the years. Mrs. Cormann said she has never tired of teaching and being with the kids, “Every year is totally different.” Her classroom is a burst of color and creativity, displaying all kinds of art and projects connected to the children’s learning. It is a dream atmosphere for five and six-year-olds.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising then that so many students come back to visit years later. Some even come back to do teaching internships or become assistants. “They have very positive memories,” says Mrs. Cormann, recalling young people who come in with their partners and say, “That was my classroom” with great pride - even if they can no longer squeeze into the pint-size chairs. Because some of the staff have been there so long, the kids can always pop in and say “Do you remember me?” says Mrs. Bolik. And the chances are yes. With some staff having been there for decades, faces remain familiar.

When asked about what they like to do in their leisure time, there is a pause in an otherwise lively conversation. It becomes clear that both women live and breathe the school; it has filled so much of their lives. But concerts, walking and cycling in the countryside and theater do fit in when there is time. The Bonn Players English theater group does all of its rehearsals at IBIS and one can imagine they take in a few sneak previews from time to time.

IBIS has been in the news recently, having put in an application to establish a secondary school. At this time, there is nothing new to report on that front but what remains certain is that Mrs. Cormann and Mrs. Bolik will continue their work as always, contributing to the rich international fabric of Bonn. (Carol Kloeppel)