

From Germany to Haverhill

Ambassador talks immigration, foreign relations with students

By Peter Francis

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German Consulate General Ralf Horlemann makes a point while talking with students at Haverhill High School Wednesday afternoon. | PAUL BILODEAU/Staff photo

HAVERTHILL – "It's a challenge, But it's also an opportunity."

This was how Ralf Horlemann, the new German consulate general to New England, described the state of affairs in his home country, which is welcoming thousands of refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East each day.

Before an audience of more than 80 students from Haverhill High School's German and International Relations classes, Horlemann, a veteran of Germany's Foreign Service for more than two decades in Washington D.C., and

Asia before coming to Boston in July, spoke Thursday on a variety of topics.

They included recent events in Europe, U.S.-German relations, opportunities that exist to work for German companies, and the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

For students attending the event in the Haverhill High library, many of whom have never been to Germany, it was their first opportunity to speak to a foreign diplomat.

"I think a lot of people have a misunderstanding of Germany," said Emma Schena, a senior who is president of the school's German Club and has visited the country several times. "So when we do something like this, we get a better understanding of their culture."

Much like the U.S., Germany is a nation which finds itself at a cultural crossroads, with more and more people migrating there in hopes of achieving a better life.

While some American presidential candidates have endorsed the idea of building a wall across the Mexican border to prevent illegal immigration, Horlemann told students Germany wants to welcome refugees from countries such as Syria. He praised German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the German government for its "courageous decision" to accept them.

Reports indicate Germany could take in as many as 800,000 refugees by year's end.

"We've had a wall up which divided our country before," said Horlemann, referring to the Berlin Wall, which separated the country's capital and symbolized the division of free West Germany and communist East Germany. "We know you don't solve problems by building a wall."

A student asked Horlemann about his recollection of the wall falling. Horlemann said it was an "overwhelming" experience to watch and it inspired him to go into foreign relations.



German Consul General Ralf Horlemann talks with a group of students and administrators at Haverhill High while visiting the school Wednesday afternoon. | PAUL BILODEAU, Staff photo

"Everyone remembers what they were doing on Nov. 9, 1989," he said. "I was a studying political science in Munich and the next morning I jumped in my car and drove to Berlin, about 600 kilometers, or 400 miles, to see it. That was a defining moment for me."

In immigration, Horlemann said Germany's population is aging and the influx of immigrants is a good thing.

Many of those who attended the event are students of Zachary Simmons, a history and international relations teacher who also leads the school's Model United Nations team and sits on the organization's national board.

"We started in 2003, 2004 and we go to New York City each year. We'll go to Tufts this year," he said, adding that two of his students, since graduated and now in college, served in high-ranking positions within the student organization. "We currently have 25 students and these kids are so into it."

Regarding U.S.-German relations, Horlemann told students that 50 million Americans have German heritage, that millions have served on military bases in Germany, and that the relationship between the two nations has "never been closer than it is today."

"The United States and Germany are involved in \$173 billion in trade, and one-third of all trade between the United States and Europe is with Germany," he said. "The U.S. and Germany have a vital role to play in world affairs."

Rashaun Martin, supervisor of social studies at Haverhill High, said the number of students taking German language classes has increased and that 19 Haverhill students will be traveling to the country this summer.

While eating lunch with students on the Model United Nations team before speaking in the library, Horlemann said that, as American schools begin stressing STEM education — or science, technology, engineering and math — interest in Germany, long a world power in engineering, manufacturing and the sciences, has begun rising again.

"In the U.S., manufacturing has become a focus again, and you need engineers to make things," he said, adding that, in Germany, much of the job creation is through medium-sized to small companies and that many students pursue some sort of vocational-technical education.

"Some universities in the U.S. like the University of Rhode Island and the University of Connecticut are offering five-year programs in German and engineering," said Horlemann. Many German companies such as Siemens and Bosch employ many Americans, he said. "There are 137 and 135 new students in both of those programs (at URI and UConn) and there is lots of interest in Germany now."

As Horlemann left Haverhill High to head back to his new home in Cambridge, Simmons said he felt the day went well for his students.

"There was so much information and even kids that couldn't ask him questions asked themselves questions," he said. Simmons and his German and International Relations students will recap some of the day's discussion in their classes. "The bottom line is that the students will have a greater interest in foreign affairs and Germany because of today."

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