

Local teachers find Turkey 'in stark contrast' to stereotypes

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Three local educators will go back to school this year with more than just textbook knowledge. Victoria Robins, a history and sociology teacher at Fox Chapel Area High School; Cynthia McNulty, a literature and history teacher at Oakland Catholic; and Gary Peiffer, principal of East Allegheny High School, recently returned from a two-week tour of Turkey sponsored by the World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh and the Turkish Cultural Foundation.

All three said they are well-traveled but had never been to that part of the world. They found the people friendly and the country fascinating, and look forward to sharing what they have learned with their students.

"I don't think there are too many more critical places in the world for us to understand and teach our students, in part because the stereotype of the Muslim world is the radical, the terrorist, and Turkey stands in stark contrast to that," said McNulty, 52, of Brentwood. "I think if teachers can bring back and speak with more authority and certainty about a place in the world where 99 percent of the population is Muslim and it is a democracy -- it is a secular democracy -- that's really critical right now."

The three joined 20 other educators to visit historically and culturally significant sites and meet with Turkish educators and the minister of education.

At the request of a school in Turkey, Robins, 42, of Etna, said she expects to start an e-mail exchange between her students and their peers in Turkey. She said she found the nation to be diverse, with a secular culture where the call to prayer from the mosques is heard five times each day.

"Turkey is such a crossroads of civilization. I always wanted to go because I end up talking about it so much in my classes," she said. "I kind of hope people ask me questions and I get the opportunity to break apart some stereotypes people have."

Robins said Turkey is incredibly clean, with good infrastructure and beautiful architecture going back centuries.

"You see history every place you turn around," she said. "You're constantly seeing the layers of history throughout the country. It will pepper lots of my course. I'm excited by the many ways it will improve my teaching."

Peiffer, 41, of Wilkins, a former history teacher, said the information he has learned will be used in revising his school's social studies curriculum to include more coverage of the Middle East, geography and world cultures.

"We want to focus on Middle Eastern issues beyond Arab-Israeli issues or basic coverage of the Islamic faith. Turkey is a key component of Middle Eastern history," he said. "It's a country that there's a lot of misconceptions of and that our kids aren't familiar with but they should be familiar with."

"I encourage anybody to visit Turkey. They'll be treated great and it's an interesting place to visit," Peiffer said.