

# Miles Mac enjoys Japanese exchange

By Holli Moncrieff  
For the Free Press

**W**HAT STARTED out as a simple school language program has turned into a bridge of friendship that spans the huge gaps of distance, culture, and language for Miles Macdonell students.

When a Swiss boarding school for Japanese students heard of Miles Mac's Japanese language program, they suggested starting up a student exchange with the Winnipeg school.

"They were interested in getting involved with us because of the language program," explained teacher **Pam Okano**. "We choose to teach Japanese specifically due to student interest. A lot of students wanted to go out there, and it was quite a popular choice."

The program is an option in the school's World Language Diploma. The WLD offers students the opportunity to study a multitude of different languages and cultures.

The dream of a Japanese student exchange became a reality last summer for both schools involved, when 14 Miles Mac students travelled to Switzerland to learn at the Japanese boarding school. Sixteen of their Japanese friends then visited them here last month.

Their leaving last week was an emotional event for both sides, Okano said.

"They're already crying, because no one wants them to go," Okano said, a day before the Japanese students returned to Switzerland. "They're more than friends, they've become family. It's amazing how close they've become in three short months."

Many Miles Mac students are already planning trips to Switzerland and Japan to keep in touch with their new friends.

"We're looking into it as we speak," said a sad **Curtis Connon** of the future travel plans. "Without a doubt, the people were the best part of this experience."

Connon said the exchange helped him with a lot more than his Japanese.

"It taught me more about myself and how important friendships are," he said. "They taught me to appreciate life for what it is. Every second is important, and I don't think I realized that before."

Japanese exchange student **Takashi Kurai**, interviewed before he left on October 13, said the exchange with the East Kildonan students was just too short.

"I'm really sad to be leaving, and I wanted to stay later. It's just not enough time. I'm really sad to leave here," he said. "I've had lots of fun with my

friends, and every experience has been new for me."

Okano said that the exchange taught her students more about the culture than she could hope to in a classroom setting.

"To really learn a language, you have to hear native speakers and interact with them," she said. "To be in Switzerland really opened my students' eyes and showed them the possibilities of what is out there. Their motivation and enthusiasm to learn has really increased since they returned."

Seventy-five students in grades 10 to 12 are enrolled in the Japanese language program at Miles Mac. This is the fifth year the program has been offered at the school.

"With the current globalization of careers, kids have an international focus in mind," observed Okano. "Business was always a motivator in learning Japanese, and out in B.C. it is helpful to know the language as well."

Connon has been enrolled in the program since Grade 10.

"I was always very interested in the language and culture, so I jumped at the opportunity," he said. "The Japanese have urbanized and come into the 20th century, but they've still kept important culture aspects alive. That always interested me."