

TACOMA WEEKLY

BECAUSE COMMUNITY MATTERS

WHAT'S RIGHT WITH TACOMA: SISTER CITIES TRADE STUDENT ARTISTS



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• **GLASS ACT.** Though glass blowing has been a Biot tradition since artisans developed a distinctive bubble glass in the middle ages, the city does not have a youth program comparable to hilltop artists. *(Photo courtesy of Tacoma and Biot Sister City Program)*

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Douglas Burgess is back from France, ready to show his fellow students at Hilltop Artists how an air gun comes in handy in glassblowing.

Arsene Brie is home again in Biot, with the globes and eggs, roses and swans he learned to make at Hilltop Artists, and with tales of baseball and museums, barbecue and a leafy city.

The students, both 17, started their summers pioneering Tacoma-Biot Sister Cities' first student exchange. It's an element to the partnership that has developed with impressive speed, thanks to the resourcefulness and generosity of Tacoma's volunteers with the program.

Cathy Sarnat imagined big on Tacoma delegates' first official trip to its newest sister city, Biot, in the south of France. The group had visited a school and a college that day and were delighted that students were enthusiastic about the new partnership, which the French call a jumelage. The kids had questions about Tacoma, and about the two cities' shared arts focus on glass. Biot's hot shops, like Tacoma's, fire local imaginations – and draw tourists.

Wouldn't it be something, Sarnat mused, if Tacoma and Biot could set up a student exchange, with young people studying with local glass masters.

That was in April 2013, when the new partners were beginning to figure out how to shape their relationship to benefit both cities. They had laid down the basics. Glass artists from both cities already were visiting back and forth between the Museum of Glass, Hilltop Artists and the big hot shops and galleries in Biot. The previous fall, French delegates had come to Tacoma to sign the sister cities agreement, and to get to know their new glass sister through tours and receptions. The French were returning the hospitality and info blitz, including the trip to that school, when the student exchange buzz got going.

“That’s when the Mayor of Biot got excited about it,” Sarnat said. “They wanted to get students involved in glass blowing, which is a Tacoma strength.”

Though glass blowing has been a Biot tradition since artisans developed a distinctive bubble glass in the Middle Ages, the city does not have a youth program comparable to Hilltop Artists. The mayor wanted to learn how Tacomans run it, and why kids like it. An exchange looked like a good way to do it, and to generate excitement.

But it’s one thing for glass master Antoine Pierini, son and partner of Robert Pierini, to hop on a plane and drop in on his pals Ben Cobb and Sarah Gilbert at the Museum of Glass, then tour around the Northwest’s studios. Sending two kids, solo, across an ocean and a continent is more complicated. That’s where the Tacoma delegates’ ingenuity and generosity kicked in – again.

In Biot, the government underwrites the sister city effort, paying for delegates’ lodging, local transportation and tourism experiences. Tacoma delegates paid their own way to France. In Tacoma, the money is tighter. It, for example, had \$2,000 to cover the Biot delegates’ visit in October of 2012. Rather than spend it all on a budget motel, Sarnat offered to host the delegates at her home.

“I said, ‘I have 11 bedrooms. Why not let them stay at a landmark?’ They loved it,” Sarnat said.

She bought the Richard Vaeth House overlooking Commencement Bay when it was a wreck in the 1980s. She has restored it, and loves to explore and share its history. Vaeth, she said, was a jeweler so wealthy that Henry Ford paid him a week-long visit when he was looking for investors for his automobile company. Vaeth declined, but showed Ford the best side of the City of Destiny. The house is both historic and happy, Sarnat said.

The house, and a tiny condo Sarnat owns near Biot, came into play again as plans for the exchange developed with the teams from Biot and Tacoma, including Hilltop Artists Executive Director Kit Evans.

“This student exchange thing kept growing, and I thought Kit should see where they would be going, getting a finger on the pulse of it,” Sarnat said. So she invited her to stay in her condo near Biot, and visit all the people who would be responsible for a student. The Pierini family offered to

host the student at their homes and in their studio. Evans and Sarnat agreed to host the student from France.

The program was ready for the students.

In Biot, Arsene Brie had been studying English and ceramics at the Leonardo di Vinci school.

“I like art,” he said. “My Dad said, ‘If you want, you can go to Tacoma, our sister city, to learn glass.’ I said yes. I had already made an apprenticeship in glass.”

Brie met Douglas Burgess and Sarnat’s nephew, Chase Freeman, at Hilltop Artists summer session, where they made floats, cups, bowls, eggs and animals. After that, he worked at the Museum of Glass with Ben Cobb

“In Biot, it is watch and learn. In Tacoma, it’s watch and do,” he said of the teaching styles.

Tacoma’s is better, he said. Tacoma also has paintball, laser tag, go-karts, barbecues, baseball and a green and leafy landscape, which he explored with Freeman.

“The exchange was very good,” he said. “I want to try it again and again and again. Tacoma is very cool.”

In Tacoma, Burgess had been at Hilltop Artists since he was 12, and studying French since he started at Lincoln High School, where he will be a senior. Of Native American ancestry, he has roots in the Haida, Dakota and Umpqua tribes and dances and cooks salmon with the Argosy Cruise program at Tillicum Village on Blake Island.

Three months ago, he was asked if he would be interested in the exchange, said yes, and began raising close to \$3,000 with small grants, glass sales and his work.

His mother, Nancy Burgess, a traditional weaver, began on the thank-you gifts, pieces of Native art. She sent baskets she had made, and a purse that became a family project. Her daughter started the weaving; Nancy Burgess completed it; a nephew made the black silk lining, and the glass family at Hilltop Artists made the red, white and blue bead for the clasp.

In Biot, Burgess studied and stayed with the Pierini family.

“Antoine is very beloved in the town,” he said. “His father bought the olive oil mill for their studio.”

That’s where he learned to make the oversized paperweights swirling with color and bubbles that are a Pierini specialty. Antoine Pierini goes beyond the small bubbles made by dipping the molten glass in baking soda. “We had a wood thing with pokey sticks to make the smaller bubbles that look like drops of mercury, and an air gun to make the big bubbles.”

That's a technique he's itching to share at Hilltop Artists.

In the evenings, he said, he walked up the hill to the original walled city and explored the streets and shops. He learned to play petanque, won a trophy in a kid's tournament, and was featured in the local paper.

"After two days, I guess everyone had heard of me. I would be walking around the town, with people shaking my hand. I met the mayor," he said. "I'm so young, and I've had the opportunity to be a world traveler."

And an ambassador.