

# Bilingual on Barkly

**Did you know there's an opportunity for children to develop a bilingual brain right here in North Fitzroy? *The Rotunda* has a natter with Bernice Ressel, Principal of the Deutsche Schule Melbourne.**

**Interview by Kat Dilettante**

**Tell us a bit about yourself. Where did you teach prior to arriving in Melbourne?**

I've always been a bit of a wandering soul. I grew up in Germany in a city called Gelsenkirchen, not far from the Netherlands and moved for university studies to a town called Flensburg (up North, under Denmark). My studies included a year in Abingdon in England.

Prior to coming to Australia, I was Deputy Principal of the Primary School at the Deutsche Schule Tokyo in Yokohama: the oldest German school outside Germany! It was an invaluable experience to run a German school in such a different cultural context. It was also a unique challenge to rebuild the school after the earthquake and tsunami in 2011.

I arrived in Melbourne in September 2015 and quickly fell in love with the city and the community. Australia is such a vast and incredible country! And the lifestyle here is so relaxed, open and friendly. My happy place is bush camping with my husband and our American Staffordshire Terrier, Barkly. (Bonus points if you noticed that Deutsche Schule Melbourne is on Barkly Street!) I'm also a singer and musician and a bit of a gym junkie.

**Where else in the world are there German Schools like DSM? How would you describe the North Fitzroy flavour of the school?**

There are 140 German Schools Abroad around the world. They all distinctly German in style but each setting gives the school its unique essence. Some are embassy schools, some have a big expat community, while others have more local students than Germans. Some teach exclusively in German while here in Melbourne, we have a bilingual approach.

So it's fair to say that Deutsche Schule Melbourne is a unique offering in Melbourne and in the world. We offer an immersion program (modelled on the Canadian education system) which enables students

to start their studies without prior German knowledge. Over a third of our students would be in this category. Of course, we also enrol expat German families but also families whose first language is neither German nor English. In the end, we are a big blended multilingual family.

I think our location in North Fitzroy offers something extra special. We can enjoy all Melbourne has to offer in terms of the arts, sports and cultural events. We're so close to the beautiful Merri Creek. And we're part of a vibrant, diverse community of people who are socially aware and environmentally conscious... and know where to find the best coffee and pizza!

**What is the Deutsche Schule Melbourne experience like for a new, non-German speaking student?**

Due to the immersion model, it's not like other language learning where you have to memorise endless vocab lists and grammatical rules. It's more like picking up a language as you go, through conversation and play. Our teachers use a lot of gestures and visualisation and they don't mind repeating themselves all day! Our students hardly realise that they are adding to their vocabulary. They just do fun activities in the classroom. We also offer music, sports and arts in German, as well as heaps of social, community and extra-curricular activities.

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**What would you say to a family who read all this and thought: "Well, that sounds nice but I don't have any German heritage or plans to holiday in a German-speaking country, so what's the point?"**

I'd say: there is more to bilingualism than



Bernice Ressel Photography: Markus Weber

knowledge of two languages! There is a huge body of research on how bilingual brains are more amenable to multitasking, focused attention, problem solving and creativity.

Importantly, bilingual students have an intuitive feel for language as a gateway to culture. And, as we know, fluency in a second language and culture opens many doors for future study and employment opportunities.

We're a warm and welcoming community and a lovely place to learn. Although our school has doubled in size since I started, we still have a "small school" feel. I believe this will continue at DSM, even when we eventually open our secondary school.

I'd invite anyone who is curious about what Deutsche Schule Melbourne has to offer to visit one of our Open Days or come to our famous Christmas market!

**What's this famous Christmas market?**

The Deutsche Schule Melbourne Weihnachtsmarkt is *the* German Christmas market on the Melbourne cultural calendar. It's such a comprehensive event that some attendees don't even realise that it's a

school fête organised by a small number of volunteer families!

I feel a bit sad describing this to you because we were not able to hold our Weihnachtsmarkt in 2020, due to COVID restrictions. And now, the School Board has had to make the difficult decision not to hold the event in 2021 due to the same. But I will tell you about it in the hope that your readers will be able to enjoy this special offering in years to come.

We always start with a Welcome to Country, offered by Wurundjeri Elder and dear friend Uncle Colin Hunter. We have stalls bursting with traditional German fare: Stollen, home baked biscuits, soft pretzels, sausages, beer and Glühwein. We also sell crafty goodies made by students and a parent-run makers group. And the most impressive gingerbread houses you'll ever see. We have our own cookbook! Our teachers cook up delicious crêpes. It's not unusual to see people dressed in Lederhosen. There are a lot of fun activities for children of all ages. We end the night with our student choir leading us through traditional Christmas carols. And if everyone has been very nice all year, then Saint Nicholas will make an appearance on his donkey!