



Left: The German School of Madison Board: (from left to right) Catrin Weimbs (president), Anja Wanner, Iris Hengst, Silke Schmidt, and Axel Junker. Not pictured: Robert Godfrey and Chris Tabisz.  
Below: One of the German School classes



## Eins, Zwei, Drei Say “Hi” to Anja Wanner and The German School of Madison

BY RACHEL DIGMAN | PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF RALPH GRUNEWALD

**ANJA WANNER AND** Ralph Grunewald have contributed much to UW-Madison and to the Madison community, particularly in their co-founding of and commitment to the German School of Madison.

The story begins in Germany where Anja and Ralph met just around the time Anja was offered a position at UW-Madison. “Ralph was still in grad school at the time,” Anja explains. “After several years of transatlantic commuting (if that’s what it can be called), we decided in 2009 to make Madison our home and to raise our

daughter, Claire (“Clairchen”), bilingually.” Claire was born in Madison in 2008 with a dual citizenship.

It was the very presence of Claire in Ralph and Anja’s lives that brought about the beginning of the German School of Madison, a parent-founded non-profit organization that offers German language classes for children with and without prior knowledge of German. “The school started out as an informal play group run by parents with a connection to the German language and slowly grew into something

more structured,” Anja recalls. “It was sheer luck that we stumbled upon what was then called the ‘German playgroup’ in 2011, when our daughter was three years old. It was clear to me from the get-go that we had to become more visible in order to serve a wider audience.”

Last year was a year of change for the

German school. “We went from an under-the-radar community with no internet presence, not even a Facebook page, to a 501(c)3 organization with a structure that is recognized and supported by the German government,” Anja explains. People can now find the group through the website: [www.germanschoolofmadison.org](http://www.germanschoolofmadison.org). “A key moment for me was when I discovered that there is a whole network of German part-time schools abroad and that the German government provides professional support for schools like ours,” Anja continues. “We wrote our first book grant in 2014 and proudly distributed the books to our students a couple of months later.”

The main goal of the German School of Madison is to offer high-quality German language instruction for children and to prepare them for internationally recognized proficiency exams. The group also works to offer social activities and family-friendly events that share and explain the German culture. Families volunteer at these events either through organizing or providing food or supplies. In this way, the group is able to keep tuition low for their students and maintain low class sizes of about 4-8 students.

“Our annual events are open to the public and include opportunities for the children to get involved and learn about German culture. The main events are Martinstag or St. Martin’s Day in the fall which includes a lantern walk, German Karneval or Fasching in February where the children dress up as clowns, cowboys, pirates, etc., and a visit from St. Nicholas in December,” shares Anja. “My favorite, though, is our summer graduation party, where children from all the classes perform and receive their certificates.”

The welcoming thing about the German School of Madison is that it caters both to families who speak German as a first language and to families who want to learn German as a foreign language. “Many of our students live in homes where one parent is a native speaker of German, but German is not necessarily spoken regularly in the home,” Anja says. “While children acquire language much more easily than adults, they need regular interaction in the language, ideally also with their peers. We found that there is no instruction in German generally available to children in Madison and decided to fill that gap.”

It soon became clear that there was also demand for German language classes for children with no prior knowledge of German. “This doesn’t really come as a surprise considering that over 40% of Wisconsinites are of German heritage,” Anja states. “Our school therefore offers two branches of instruction: German as a second/native language and German as a foreign language.”

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## Why Learn German?

By Anja Wanner

Parents know that speaking a second language has benefits that go beyond the practical ability of making oneself understood in a different country. Linguistic research has shown that the brain of bilingual children is different from that of their monolingual peers – in a good way!

- The constant juggling of two language systems seems to strengthen the brain's "executive system," i.e. the system that we use for planning, multi-tasking, and problem-solving.
- It has been found that being bilingual delays the onset of Alzheimer's Disease.
- On a very practical note, knowledge of German enables international students to receive a first-rate education at a German university – which is free! (The number of American students studying at German universities has increased by 56% over the past 10 years, according to a recent report on NPR).
- Speaking German can open doors to employment with a German company with global business connections.

The German School of Madison holds its classes once a week at Neighborhood House Community Center, 29 South Mills Street. Scheduling and tuition information can be found on the website: [www.germanschoolofmadison.org](http://www.germanschoolofmadison.org). The Facebook page can be found by searching for German School of Madison. To contact them, email at [germanschoolofmadison@gmail.com](mailto:germanschoolofmadison@gmail.com).

Anja has noticed the German roots that have shown through in the local culture. "Raising a bilingual child has made me much more aware of 'Germanisms' in Wisconsin English," says Anja. "My favorite example is the expression, 'Are you coming with?' The stranded 'with' at the end seems like a direct translation from German. The first time I heard it I thought it sounded completely wrong, like something a native speaker of German would say. I then learned that it is actually a very idiomatic construction, at least in Wisconsin."

Serving as the co-founder of the German School of Madison has allowed Anja to carry out her beliefs about education. "I'm a big believer in the Wisconsin Idea—the idea that education and research should improve people's lives beyond the boundary of the university," Anja says, who has a PhD in English linguistics from the University of Göttingen and teaches in the English department at UW-Madison. "As a linguist, I have an interest in all things language, but my interest in bilingualism was purely academic before our daughter was born in 2008. We wanted her to grow up bilingually and become a citizen of two cultures. I am thrilled to have the opportunity to combine my academic expertise and personal investment with serving the local community."

The German School of Madison runs its classes throughout the typical school year, beginning in September. "We would be delighted to welcome new families to the GSoM for the new school year," Anja shares. "Online registration is available through our website and I would be happy



Clairchen with her lantern for Martinstag.

to address any questions about the school. Each family is expected to take on a volunteering opportunity—this may be the organization of an event, donating goods or services (we may at some point need to find a new location for our classes), helping with the organization of the library, supporting our fund raising and marketing efforts, or becoming involved as a member of the Board. Donations to our scholarship fund are tax-deductible. It would also be wonderful to be able to offer extracurricular activities in German (music, soccer, dance) or German movie nights. With over 40 million people in the US claiming German ancestry and with Germany being the #1 export nation in the world, there is a lot of room for growth for our school."

## Behind the Scenes with Anja, Ralph and Clairchen, a German School family

**TO LEAVE YOU** thinking that the German School of Madison is the only endeavor that the Wanner-Grunewald family has taken on in their time in Madison would be a disservice to our readers. All three of the family members are deeply involved in a variety of pursuits that have created a well-rounded, culturally-diverse life for their family.

After coming to Wisconsin for Anja's job with UW-Madison, both Ralph and Anja pursued their interests through the university. "My research area, broadly defined, is English grammar," shares Anja. "In my teaching, I also cover the history of English and topics in first and second language acquisition. My current book project, *Bad Grammar*, examines how ideas about what constitutes



bad grammar have changed and how the language that people actually use differs from the language they think they use."

Anja's excellence in her work was recognized in 2014 when she received the Distinguished Teacher Award, an honor

with which the university recognizes its finest educators. Anja also blogs at [sch-naufblog.blogspot.com](http://sch-naufblog.blogspot.com) about two of her main interests: dogs and language.

At the university, Ralph found a joint appointment as an assistant professor in



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Clairchen in the *Nutcracker*



Clairchen at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

the Department of Comparative Literature and Folklore Studies and with the Center for Law, Society & Justice. “I hold a German law degree, a PhD in criminal Law from the University of Mainz in Germany, and a Master of Laws degree from the UW-Madison Law School,” explains Ralph. “At the UW, I worked with the Wisconsin Innocence Project, a program that helps wrongfully convicted inmates to get exonerated, and got fascinated by comparative

questions of truth and justice. That area is still my main research interest. Apart from thinking about how to make the criminal justice system more truthful, I also study the narratological, the story side, of those cases. I am currently working on a book project, *The Guilt Paradigm*, in which I analyze how the criminal justice system constructs legal blameworthiness.”

While that sounds like enough to keep one person busy, outside of work, Ralph

still finds time to run and has competed in marathons with sub 3-hour times in several of them. “You will probably see him in the Arboretum or around Lake Monona,” says Anja. “He is also an avid photographer and has had images published in places like *National Geographic* and on book covers.” The Milwaukee Art Museum used one of Ralph’s images on the flyer that every new visitor picks up at the entrance. “But ever since he became a dad, Ralph shifted to more human subjects, although he still finds ways to combine his interests,” shares Anja, referring to the accompanying picture of Clairchen in the Milwaukee Art Museum.

Speaking of Claire, she, too, pursues her passions outside of school and German School. “Clairchen loves anything that has to do with art and music,” Anja states. “She has been playing the piano since she was four, often to a captive audience of stuffed animals dressed in tutus. These past two years, she has performed in Madison Ballet’s *Nutcracker* as an angel and a little mouse, and she is eager to move up to the next role this year.”

The family has recently said goodbye to



a very important member: their 15-year-old dog Brandy, a black lab mix from the Green County shelter. “We miss her terribly, and we also miss meeting all the dog owners on our walks through Nakoma,” says Anja. “We look forward to a new

puppy, a Small Munsterlander, joining our family in August. The breed is very popular in Germany but hard to come by in the U.S. We will have a mischievous white-and-brown puppy with floppy ears and wagging tail joining us on our walks in August!”

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