



Birgit Vosseler-Brehmer Wins 2012 School Outreach Contest: 2012-13 Contest Now Open

By Lillian Clementi

The prize in ATA's eighth annual School Outreach Contest went to ATA member Birgit Vosseler-Brehmer for a photo marking her presentation to an 11th-grade English class at the Kurfürst-Salentin-Gymnasium in Andernach, Germany.

The winning shot shows a relaxed Birgit seated on a flight of stairs with a crowd of smiling 17-year-olds. Two of the students hold copies of *The ATA Chronicle*, clearly linking the photo to the translation and interpreting professions. “The teacher suggested taking the picture on the stairs,” Birgit recalled. “The *Chronicle* seemed the simplest, most effective way of showing that the presentation was about translation, and I was pretty sure that I could get the students to pose with it in their hands.”

Closing a Gap

Though the prospect of winning a

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free conference registration was attractive, Birgit was also strongly motivated by what she saw as a lack of information on careers in translation. “I remembered myself when I was young and didn’t have enough personal input on choosing a career,” she recalled. “Though there is an internship program at my girls’ school, there isn’t any career information. I suggested a series of parent presentations to the middle school director, and she invited me to speak to her advanced English class.”

Now What?

Once she had the invitation, Birgit had to develop content for her presentation—and it was her first experience with school outreach. “At first I was at a loss and didn’t know where to start,” she said. “I looked at a couple of the model presentations on ATA’s School Outreach page (www.atanet.org/careers/school_outreach.php). I also read the suggestions on speaking to high school students and followed the general advice on content. I described the daily life of a translator, covered the ➡

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tools and skills you need, and compared modern working conditions to translation in olden days. It was important to me to show them how freelancers work—and that in addition to having language skills, you need to know how to run a business.”

ATA to the Rescue

The materials on the School Outreach webpage also helped Birgit overcome speaker’s nerves. “I was scared: I thought, ‘I hope I survive this.’ And because it was an English class, I had to present in English, which made it even more challenging,” said Birgit, a native German speaker.

“Talking to young people was also a little scary—they can be rather critical—but that fear turned out to be unfounded. I went to the School Outreach webpage and read the section on managing nerves. I also reread my notes from an ATA Client Outreach session on public speaking,” she said.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Birgit also worked hard to make the presentation a success, practicing her remarks several times to polish her speaking style and calm her nerves.

“The first time it was awful,” she recalled. “The next time it was a little better but not great, and by the third or fourth time, the words really started to flow.”

A Day in the Life

During her presentation, Birgit gave the 17-year-olds a glimpse into the life of a translator, describing a typical workday, providing an introduction to translation tools, and discussing the pros and cons of working from home.

“The teacher told me that she had recently talked to the class about



Birgit with students at the Kurfürst-Salentin-Gymnasium.

working in a home office, so I was a living example of what they’d just discussed,” she said. “I also wanted to encourage young people to think about a freelance career, especially women. It’s not easy for women to combine truly professional careers and family in Germany. It was important to me to show that translation is a real career and that you need to be professional if you want to succeed.”

At the teacher’s request, Birgit also discussed curricula vitae (CVs) and how the students could adapt them when they apply to schools in other countries. “It’s not effective just to translate a CV,” she told them. “You have to tailor it to the target audience.”

A New Footing with Teachers

In addition to making the students more aware of translation, Birgit also hoped to achieve a second goal—establishing a peer-to-peer relationship with their teacher.

“Sometimes teachers view us just as parents, not as professionals with careers, and I find there’s still some prejudice against working moms,” she said. “I wanted to put the relationship on a different footing and be helpful to the teacher, and I think I succeeded. The teacher was quite

impressed with the information I provided and wanted to give it to the school’s career counselor.”

A freelance translator since 1999, Birgit translates from English into German and has practiced translation in both the U.S. and Germany, where she is also a member of the Bundesverband der Dolmetscher und Übersetzer. Since the beginning, she says, she has focused on professionalizing her practice, becoming more specialized, and building her subject area knowledge. “Currently my main areas of expertise are automation, linear motion technology, and environmental analysis. I’m also working hard on finance,” she said. “Adding more direct clients to my portfolio is another important goal.” She lives in Andernach with her husband Thomas Brehmer and their daughters, Sarah, 16, and Nathalie, 14.

“Go for it”

Asked what she would say to fellow translators and interpreters about her School Outreach experience, Birgit replied, “Go for it. Do it—it’s really a worthwhile experience. And it’s important to stay in touch with young people.”

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