

Good companions fly together

Pupils at Willow Park School recently hailed with delight a new concept. It's called the Companion Flag and was brought to them by a pair of backpacking Canadians, Winston and Jen Yeung.

But even before the couple's arrival, the pupils' enterprising teacher, Pauline Nicholson, had searched the net and gleaned so much information about the flag concept that Winston and Jen were greeted by a heartfelt and to-the-point demonstration of what it's all about.

The flag is designed to fly underneath another nation's ensign and represents all that human beings have in common.

'It embraces a universal paradox where you can celebrate your differences and your similarities with other people at the same time', says Winston. 'Flown underneath the flag of your nation, it shows that we have things in common with other people of other nations, other cities, other races, whatever it happens to be.'

'The idea is that, when the flag is flown it triggers people to think about the concept, to think, "Yes there's my flag up there and the flag below it tells me that I am just like everyone else around the world."'

The idea was dreamed up by an American named Scott Wyatt who was looking for a symbol of humanity's unity. In 1997 he closed his law practice and founded a small non-profit organization. In terms of level of commitment required by schools it is simply an awareness programme. The flags – white with a stripe along the top, usually in a colour borrowed from the flag it flies beneath –



Staff and pupils of Willow Park School join Winston and Jen Yeung with the new Companion Flag.

are provided free. The concept has been slowly taking root among people in countries as far-flung as Russia, Japan, Uzbekistan, the US and Canada. Growing numbers are logging onto the website as travellers like the Yeungs incorporate its dissemination into their itineraries.

'Once we introduce it to a school we often find that teachers network amongst themselves and the word goes around from educator to educator which is really neat to see,' Winston says.

When they are contacted by a teacher in a different country they send materials, point them to the website, put them in touch with somebody who has already been involved with the flag and give them ideas for encouraging enthusiasm among the students.

In the case of Willow Park School, Pauline Nicholson researched the concept on the website and her class presented a performance to the Yeungs and their Year 5 and 6 peers, demonstrating its meaning.

About 20 chil-

dren from different countries came on stage with flags they had drawn up of where their ancestors came from. One by one they held up their flags saying which country they came from and ending with the words, 'I am different'. Then the next in line would say, 'But I am the same'.

The next step was to give examples of how they were the same: they all love their parents, they want to feel safe and secure, they want to have a roof over their heads, they all have feelings... Winston and Jen were delighted.

'So when it came to our turn to be introduced, they had already grasped the whole concept, it was fabulous. And we only had to say a few words to encourage them to think about more ideas of what they have in common. So they are the very first school to adopt the flag in NZ.'

Pauline Nicholson hopes to hear from other interested New Zealand schools once Willow Park figures on the Companion Flag Website. She says, 'A lot of questions were asked about the flag when it first went up, particularly from the junior school pupils. We now fly both flags every Friday to remind us that we are all one school and have the same needs, fears etc as do the people of the world outside'.

Further details about the Companion Flag concept can be found on the website: www.companionflag.org.



Children at Willow Park School demonstrate the concept behind the Companion Flag