

Indonesian students visit area

31 come to practice English, make friends

By JESSICA GOODMAN
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With rapt attention, the 31 high school students and five teachers from Jakarta, Indonesia, took a conversational English class Friday at Blue Ridge Community Health Services. They filled the conference room at the agency's offices off Howard Gap Road.

The visitors are exploring businesses, attractions and agencies in Henderson and Buncombe counties.

"In English, the definition of

community is people who live together in a specific area," said Jennifer Henderson, executive director of Blue Ridge Community Health Services. "You'll find in Hendersonville and Western North Carolina, it means much more than that."

The trip was made possible through the Friendship Force International and the Western North Carolina chapter. Eighteen local families are hosting the kids and the teachers, who are spread across the two counties and down to Saluda.

Doug Judkins, a member and past president of the WNC chapter, is hosting two students and a

teacher.

"You've arrived as strangers to us," he said. "But I promise, when you leave, you'll feel like family."

The students are from the SMAN 8, an elite high school for gifted students in Indonesia. The students will be in the area until Wednesday.

To start off the conversational English classes, the students played a game. They had a sheet filled with a graph of boxes. In each box was a question: Do you have a pet? Do you have a brother? The students hustled around the classroom, asking their classmates, teachers and visitors the questions, in English and had

each person sign his or her name in the box. For a few minutes, the excited voices mixed. "Are you wearing red?" or "Do you know more than two languages?"

Desi Purnama, an English teacher at the school, hopes the trips teach her students about cultural understanding.

"First, the experience they have should change their view of America," Purnama said. "It's different from Hollywood and what you see in the movies."

The students also stopped over in Los Angeles, so they were able to get two views.

◆ SEE INDONESIA PAGE C3



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Steve Kirkland, right, chief development officer for Blue Ridge Community Health Services, helps 15-year-old Gagas, an elite student from Jakarta, Indonesia work on his English.

INDONESIA

From page C1

"Our purpose to come here is not only for the students to learn English, but to create friendship," Purnama said.

Purnama has visited America and North Carolina before. She said the people in this area are "warm people. They really welcome us."

Steve Kirkland, chief development officer for BRCHS, is hosting Gagas, 15.

"Not only did my wife and I want the experience, we wanted to expose our son, Brackin, to life beyond Hendersonville," Kirkland said. Brackin is a 15-year-

old sophomore at Hendersonville High School.

Mayor Barbara Volk and Bill Moyer, the chairman of the Henderson County Board of Commissioners, also visited the students.

"I hope you have a very valuable experience," Moyer said to the gathered students. Moyer also said it was "a real pleasure" to have the students in Henderson County.

The students will be visiting a diverse selection of places, including DuPont State Park and Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site. They'll also participate in Earth Day at the Nature Center in Asheville, visit the Islamic Center in Asheville and take a walk through downtown Hen-

dersonville.

Judkins said the motto of the Friendship Force is "changing the way you see the world." The Friendship Force International was chartered in 1977 under the presidency of Jimmy Carter. The Western North Carolina Chapter was organized in 1979, with the first exchange happening in 1980. Visitors from Germany were the first to travel to Western North Carolina under the Friendship Force's exchange programs.

For more information on the local chapter, visit www.fwnc.org.

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