

This story was written for the Tempe Elementary School District's website. Upon returning from my Peace Corps service in Albania, I started working for the district and welcomed the opportunity to collaborate with teachers here and current PCVs and Albanian friends to build this pen pal program.

“Hello fellow human!”

Tempe Elementary third-graders traveled thousands of miles this year and made new friends from a foreign country – all right in the classroom. A pen pal program kicked off this March between Albanian students and students at Aguilar and Rover Elementary. Students from Tempe wrote letters telling the Albanian kids about Arizona, what they do in their free time, and what their favorite foods and movies are.

Letters from Aguilar were sent first, where students wrote things such as “I live in the Sonoran desert. On a hot day, it can reach 108 degrees.” Responses from the Albanian students included “I live in the center of Albania. In my free time, I read books or play computer games.”

Rover students did research on the country of Albania, and found some interesting facts. “I know your capital city is Tirana. I have heard your national anthem the Himni I Flamurit (Hymn to the Flag). I know your money is called the lek. Our money is called the dollar,” said one student. Perhaps the best line of all was written in the first sentence of the letter, “Hello fellow human.” Students also drew pictures of the US and Arizona flag, along with the Albanian flag. Third-grade teachers Sonja Long, Aguilar Elementary, and Jessica Foster, Rover Elementary, are thrilled to be part of the program. “I love and invite any opportunity to make real world connections for my students,” said Long. When Foster was approached with the idea, she responded, “Pen pals in Albania would be amazing! My students will be thrilled!”

This experience of connecting “humans” who are growing up on different sides of the world will continue when school starts again in August 2012. Who knows, perhaps some of them will meet in person someday.