Twenty-three students return home to Michigan after being delayed for four days because of volcano eruption in Europe.

By DAVID C. BUTTY

We finally heard the news that we had been expecting since Wednesday when the Icelandic volcano erupted spewing a cloud of ash across Europe. As air traffic came to a complete standstill, we were caught in the midst of it all.

"Do you want to hear the bad news first or the good news first," an airline representative asked. "The bad news first," I told him. "Your scheduled flight out of Athens has been cancelled, and we are not sure when we will reschedule your flight. It might be a day or two, or perhaps three, but you can rest assured that we are working hard to get you a flight out of here," he added.

I listened to him with eyes wide open as I surveyed the tourists going up the Acropolis. Did they miss their flights too? I wondered as my mind began running in circles. I had to break the news to the students. Don't ask me if I had ever heard of Eyjafjallajokull or that there are others like it that at any moment could erupt. The only thing on my mind was that here we were, stranded in Athens, Greece, with 23 students just completing the District's study abroad trip.

Our program in Athens was held at the Athens Centre, and contained a study of conversational Greek, and educational tours of the Acropolis, and other archeological sites surrounding Athens. The good news was that we still had our hotel accommodations.

While in Greece, the students had visited educational and cultural sites, including the Rock that most considered the most important monument because of its influence on architecture; the Temple of Athena Nike, founder of the city of Athens; and the Agora, the ancient marketplace and seat of Greek philosophy, religion, commerce, politics, arts, and athleticism. This is where Socrates addressed his public, where the concept of democracy was born and where St. Paul preached to the Athenians.

Other notable places of interest during this educational sojourn were the Benaki Museum, which offers visitors a quick view of Greek history; the Greek Parliament, where they observed the changing of the guards at the "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier;" the Temple of Zeus, considered father of the Greek gods; and the Temple of Poseidon. Students also enjoyed the tree-lined walkway which provided a continuous pedestrian link between all the major shopping places in Athens.

Following our intensive program of study and exploration of everything Greece had to offer, we were all ready to leave for home, but volcanic ash from the eruption of Eyjafjallajokull had disrupted our return home. We were not alone in this dilemma as millions of travelers around the globe were also caught in this episode brought about by a natural disaster. Everyone was wondering when the airlines would give the "all clear green light." I gathered our team together. There were mixed feelings about the situation, and at the same time there was joy. Some students were happy at the news that they were going to be able to explore Athens more because of the delay. Everyone, even families, friends and loved ones back home in the United States were monitoring the situation.

"I've had a great time in Greece. I hoped it would be sooner rather than later before we got a flight to go home," said one student as she tried to make sense of the whole episode. One student suggested that we get on a cargo ship to Detroit. Like every other person stranded by the volcano, we were looking at whatever viable options that would allow us to return to the States. "I will never forget my study abroad trip to Greece and when people start to talk about the volcano eruption that shut down all air travel. I will say yes I know, I was in Athens," said one student.

Though the Acropolis Hotel was running near capacity to accommodate...
guests who had previous bookings, they were kind enough to extend our accommodations. Another concern for everyone was running out of essential items such as medications, clothing and funds, but we worked through these challenges.

Like every student who participated in the study abroad trip, Urshula Turner was grateful for the opportunity. She said the trip brought students closer together because it is a District-wide program, and the friendships made there will last forever.

“It was a blessing to experience this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I will be forever grateful to WCCCD for allowing me the chance to explore and learn. When I pursue my next career, I will return the deed by sponsoring someone in the study abroad program. Experiencing a country first hand is a whole lot better than just reading about it in books.”

Tiffany Murphy said the trip gave her new interest in mastering languages and becoming culturally competent. “Coming home from Greece, I realized that other countries have so much to offer students in the way of learning. Languages, cultures, foods, history, are all unique to each country. I wish one day to visit other faraway places to regain the wonderful feeling that I had when I visited Greece. WCCCD opened that door and made it possible for me. I can’t express how fortunate it was to be there. I hope the study abroad program goes on to enlighten other students to the extent that I have been enlightened.”

Kristi Regener says she will always remember how enlightening the trip was. She referred to the extra days in Greece as “being happily stranded and an opportunity that allowed the students to explore more of Greece. I took a one-day cruise tour of the islands of Hydra, Poros, and Aegina. These amazing islands reminded me of movies and paintings I’ve seen. I couldn’t believe that I was able to see them and feel fortunate to have had this opportunity,” she added.

“The 2010 Study Abroad Trip to Greece was nothing short of amazing! We had an exceptional group, excellent food and a remarkable learning experience. I am so glad that I was a member of this program,” another student wrote. As the Greek would say, Efharisto! (Thank you)!”