Washougal, WA -- It all begins with the question "Where in the World is Zylus Italiano?" From there it becomes a rich and very personal lesson in geography and culture for Heather Kassel’s second grade class at Cape Horn-Skye Elementary in Washougal.

Italiano and his parents, Heather Keller and Dave Italiano, have embarked on a six-month around the world trip which he is sharing with his classmates through emails, pictures, Facetime, packages, videos, and reports about the places he goes.

According to Keller, when Mrs. Woody, CH-S principal, was first approached about the trip last February, she immediately saw that there was a way to make the travel educational for Zylus' class and a process that could be incorporated that would be beneficial for everyone. “I recall her saying ‘I feel like I'm going around the world too!’” Keller said.

The family left February 13 and the first stop was Fiji. “We studied where Fiji is located in the world, the continent it is associated with, the flag, and some of the words in their language,” Kassel explained. “We will do that with each of the places he visits.” To help the class follow along and document their learning, Kassel created “Where in the World is Zylus Italiano?" booklets to be filled in with information they learn about his stops around the world.

It was 8:25 a.m. in Washougal and 11:25 p.m. in Bali when the class Facetimed Italiano on March 24. “We have to talk quietly,” he instructed. “My dad is sleeping!”

Once connected online, the students stood in line and took turns in front of the camera asking questions they had prepared about life in Bali. Questions range from favorite food to scariest insect. Italiano can be seen on the computer screen projected on a screen and gives each question plenty of thought and offers an interesting and informative answer. One student asked if he had gotten a haircut. “I did,” he answered brightly. “And it came with a massage!”

"It's a lot of fun when I get to talk to my class on FaceTime,” Italiano said. “It feels good to be able to see everyone again.  It's great to have them to talk to me almost every Friday. I really like it when I get to see their faces when they open our care packages. It's nice to see them using the words in the language spoken where I am visiting.”

According to Keller, Zylus' weekly reports are the very best kind of rewarding hard work. “Finding material to share is not at all a challenge,” she said.  “Linking what we've seen together to have it make sense and be interesting takes time and care. The questions asked by the class affirm that they are learning, absorbing, interested and curious.”

Packages from the travelers seem to be as much fun to send as they are for the class to receive. The first package was from Fiji and included hand-carved “vonu,” or turtles, in Fijian, which are a sign of good luck there. The second package took many weeks to arrive from Australia and was filled with small stuffed koala bears holding the Australian flag and a tube of Vegemite for Kassel to share with the class. Students lined up for a dab of the black spread on rice crackers and then quickly lined up at the trash can and water fountain to spit out the odd treat and get the salty taste out of their mouths. “It doesn’t taste very good, but it is healthy,” assured Italianio as he watched his classmates react to the package contents during the recent FaceTime chat from Bali.

It was important to Italiano’s parents that he not miss out on his education at home while on the trip. “I hooked them up with the online versions of our curriculums so they could teach him the same things we are learning here,” said Kassel. “They were really on board. They took all of the materials with them that they needed in order to do all of the assignments abroad.  They know all the information he would miss in math, reading, and writing.”

“We are very committed to having Zylus keep up with the school curriculum,” Keller said. “It's nice to have the flexibility to choose which days we do school and which days we take off, depending on our travel schedule. Our rule of thumb is first school, then adventure!”

Dave Italiano agrees with the importance of education during the trip. "I did not anticipate that the process of schooling my son would even further increase my reverence for the school system and what teachers do for our children,” he said. “Though schooling Zylus is our highest priority on this trip, next to safety, I have to say it is the most challenging aspect of our travels."

A world map in the classroom has pins in each of the family’s major destinations with lines added to track their progress. Their itinerary reads like an epic adventure. Fiji (17 days), Australia (long layover), Bali (1 month), Thailand (1 month), Nepal (1 month), China (2 weeks), Mongolia (4 days), Zimbabwe (1 month), Morocco (2 weeks) and Italy (17 days).

“Our 180 days around the world has already been the adventure of a lifetime, exceeding hopes and dreams,” said Keller. “We are fortunate to be far enough along in our careers that we were able to dream big and save for a long time to make this happen. Dave is an engineer who worked just shy of 20 years for his company. I have my own business as a professional harpist. We are taking a leap of faith, as Dave had to resign his position and I had to allow others to serve my market.  We are all very much aware that our full days together as a family on this journey are an incredible gift.”

Family, friends and classmates are following their progress on the website they created

<http://180kellerano.weebly.com/>. “Zy's Page” has YouTube links to all of his school reports.  “Our connection with Cape Horn-Skye has become the North Star of our entire trip,” said Keller.

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