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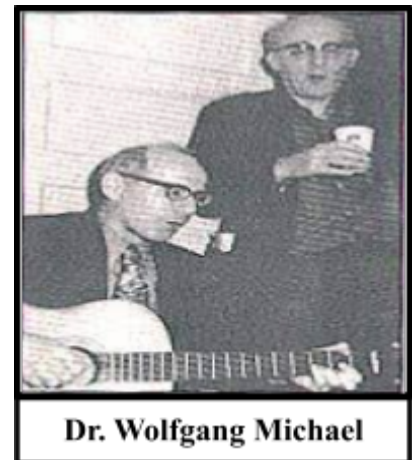
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Die Geschichte von Houstonfest

Houstonfest is an annual German competition held in Houston, Texas, that brings together teachers and their pupils from across the Houston-area's many school districts to allow German-learning middle- and high-school students to celebrate and showcase their proficiency and admiration for the German language and its respective culture. Houstonfest is rich in the history of its origins, and since its founding has supplied students with the ability to not only learn and appreciate German culture through a creative outlet, but has also given thousands of students the opportunity to meet new people and make new friends with similar interests to themselves through friendly competition and unique experiences.

Humble Beginnings

Houstonfest originally formed as a local group consisting of Texas high-school students learning German. This small party would become known as the Texas Association of German Students, or TAGS. Dr. Wolfgang F. Michael – a professor of German at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) – was one of the original sponsors of TAGS, as well as UT's Weihnachtsfest. Along with a small council of teachers, Dr. Michael would allow the students and teachers to occasionally have meetings at the University of Texas at Austin. This became the seed that would sprout to become Houstonfest.



Growing Pains

The Texas Association of German Students, with its few followers, became stagnant and uneventful. The small group of participating teachers agreed that their club needed an element of competition in order to arouse the interests of more students and to show them that learning a language can be fun and exciting. In 1980, the first annual Houstonfest German competition was held.

Founders & Foundations

Among the coalition of teachers who founded Houstonfest was a German teacher of 38 years who taught at every level from junior-high to college; his name was Paul Soechting. Soechting, and Mary El-Beheri, the first director of the Texas State German Contest (served from 1982 to 2012) were the first to recognize their students' tedium with the local group, TAGS. Soechting, along with others, would begin to formulate ideas with the purpose of inspiring students to participate and take an interest in the German language, as well as German culture.



This ultimately led to Paul Soechting becoming the first regional director and coordinator of Houstonfest for 27 years before passing the position down to Rustin Buck in 2007. Houstonfest quickly began to thrive after its launch, with the participation of around 40 schools', and roughly 55 team events and individual contests – such as grammar contests, listening comprehension, skits and puppet shows, prose and poetry renditions, and folk dances – for the hundreds of

students to participate in; making Houstonfest one of the largest German competitions both state-wide and nationally.

A Celebration of German Culture

Although Soechting played an elemental role in the establishment of the competition, Houstonfest's success should truly be attributed to the collective efforts of Texas' elite German educators and their students. According to both Soechting and Buck, middle- and high-school teachers have been instrumental in Houstonfest's growth due to the dedication required to influence and prepare their students outside of their normal curriculum, and additionally making up a large number of the judges and staff at Houstonfest. With that in mind, it must also be noted that German students put an immense amount of effort into their events. Though most students typically only participate in one or two events, some choose to participate in 10 or more contests.

Houstonfest has been widely regarded as more than just an opportunity for students to display their linguistic abilities, but also a very positive social opportunity, resulting in many new friendships. In a small poll recently done at Kingwood High School, one of the regularly attending schools at Houstonfest, more than 90% of students claim to have had a very positive experience participating in the competition and, of those students, almost all of them have claimed to have made new friends through participation. Many students, regionally, claim that Houstonfest has been a wonderful bonding experience for them that makes learning fun and eventful; an experience that gives them something to look forward to and a common goal to strive for with their peers and friends.

Looking Ahead

The future of Houstonfest, according to regional director Rustin Buck, looks promising with the gradual increase of schools attending, following a drop from 2020 to 2022 due to COVID-19. The history of the Houstonfest German competition is a testament to the enduring commitment of German students in Texas, the teachers' passion to spread their knowledge of the German language, and their devotion to education and the German culture.

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