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U foreign students connect with youth

Classroom visits by University foreign students promote cultural awareness in K-12 schools across Minnesota.

By Ed Swaray

As Avigya Karki delivered a presentation about the religions of his native Nepal to junior high school students Monday, a ninth-grader blurted out a common youthful response.

"Holy cow!" said Bridget Denery, a Staples-Motley High School student.

Karki, amused by the girl's outburst, explained that Hindus consider cows sacred and do not eat beef.

The literal coincidence between the girl's comment and Karki's explanation is one example of cultural differences displayed at an International Classroom Connection event.

Organized by the Minnesota International Center, the program connects University students from around the world with Minnesota school children.

Students from three schools in the Staples, Minn., area met with University students from India, Pakistan, Nepal, China and Jamaica.

The program promotes greater awareness and understanding of other cultures, said Catherine Born, the center's deputy director. It gives international students the opportunity to share their cultures with K-12 classrooms and learn about Minnesota schools and young people at the same time, Born said.

International students stay with host families if they are presenting in the greater Minnesota area.

"It is important to bring people face to face together in order to better understand one another's cultures and countries of origin," she said.

During the 2002-03 school year, 71 volunteer speakers from 42 countries made 438 presentations to more than 11,500 Minnesotans, Born said. So far this year, the center has scheduled 600 presentations.

Sophia Geng, a graduate student from China who presented at Motley Elementary School, said the program was a unique opportunity for children to become open-minded about other people's cultures.

However, she said, because teachers decide what their students learn about, curriculum is limited to teachers' interests.

Robin Bragge, program manager for education at the center, said the program does not introduce new topics to the students in the classrooms. Rather, it buttresses what the teachers already have in their lesson plans.

She said the center receives requests from schools and teachers and tries to match them with speakers.

The program also trains hosting teachers how to best use international students' presentations.

“Our mission is to inspire the community to understand global issues and cultures in a world that continues to change,” Bragge said.

International students have visited the Motley-Staples Middle School and Motley Elementary School since 1996, said Jim Hofer, the schools’ principal and a University graduate.

Introducing children to cultural diversity at an early age is an important lesson, said Mel Nefstead, a Staples resident who has hosted international students in his home since the program started.

“If the children can see different people in the process of doing good, it would bring better understanding and peace,” he said.

Leon Dundas, a Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs fellow from Jamaica, presented in Staples. He said he wanted to connect personally with children, something he thinks leads to world security.

“Too many of our national leaders basically have symbolic relationships with kids,” he said. “The real reason for our work is to create a safer world for our kids.”