

World Cultures Day delivers hands-on glimpse into customs and countries

November 22, 2006 by L.A. Jones, Union Life Editor, Minnesota

Franklin Elementary School students received an in-depth glimpse, albeit through the looking glass of real-life experiences, into diverse cultures, customs and countries they may never expect to see for the remainder of their lifetimes as part of World Cultures Day Friday, Nov. 17.



Sponsored this year as in past years by the Minnesota International Center via the eyes and ears of 16 different visitors from 11 separate countries, World Cultures Day has become an annual celebration and hands-on learning experience for the Franklin student body, which itself is one of the most diverse in the entire Anoka-Hennepin School District.

"It's real neat to see how well they (the students) tune in and how interested they are," said Kathryn Scheuring, school social worker at Franklin.

As the day begins each year, Franklin students receive their own personal passports to different nations in the world, represented by individual classrooms where volunteers from the University of Minnesota and community members, all organized by the Minnesota International Center, talk to the students at their own levels of learning and comprehension.



From Poland and France to Cameroon, Nigeria and the Philippines and all places in between, the visitors all have something to share with the students and the students are only too eager to discover things that are different and foreign to them.



With their passports in hand, they receive a sticker on those passports as evidence they have visited foreign soil - even if it is just another classroom in their school building. And after hearing all about the countries of the speakers, they receive another sticker to affix to their passports - as if inspected and approved by the government.

After the morning bell rings, the students file into the Franklin gymnasium in a mostly orderly fashion, wide-eyed and exuberant that they have as much to share with their visiting guests as the guests do with them.

African American, Asian, Native American, Caucasian and a myriad of ethnicities all nestled together shoulder to shoulder on the gymnasium floor, the students erupt into song to welcome their 16 guests with a greeting for "hello," "good morning" or just simply "welcome" - in a variety of languages. It becomes a unison of small voices, purporting universal understanding and tolerance.



Ohhh, to grow up to be childlike. All prejudice and pre-conceived notions are put aside for the day as the adult visitors and volunteers take the message of the little ones to their hearts and souls, teaching the students how to say hello or greet someone in a multitude of tongues, in turn, the children rolling R's and U's and every other letter of the alphabet.

There's no consternation or condemnation here, no hate, no judgment, no ill-will - just innocence and a pure penchant to really understand their five- to 11-year-old friends thousands on thousands of miles away in Asia, Africa, Central America, South America and Europe.

They're not adults, and they just simply haven't learned yet to hate.



That is indeed what World Cultures Day at Franklin and the Minnesota International Center are all about, according to Scheuring and George Hornik, media contact for the organization responsible for sponsoring the day at Franklin and the day's introductory speaker.

Besides receiving hands-on lessons about diverse cultures, customs and countries, Scheuring said, Franklin students receive an extra lunch choice from which to choose - from different nations of the world to

spark their interest, intelligence and taste buds.

"They're having chow mein, Thai food and a German dessert," she said.

The child nutrition staff at Franklin, too, gets excited every year at the prospect of preparing things very different and unique that the students can appreciate and learn about, according to Lori Goodsell and Denise Haley, child nutrition assistants.

For Hornik, Franklin's World Cultures Day is exactly the type of outreach that the Minnesota International Center likes to epitomize, underwrite and promote because it reaches kids before they are allowed to form prejudices about people from all areas of the world who just might happen to be different from them in some way.



"World Cultures Day is a part of the Minnesota International Center's (MIC's) statewide effort to provide the school children of Minnesota with opportunities to interact with people from other cultures," he said. "MIC aims to awaken the children's curiosity and increase their cultural competency so they can successfully participate in our multicultural community."

During the 2005-06 academic year, according to Hornik, MIC coordinated more than 580 statewide visits of 72 speakers from 38 countries to an audience of 16,000 students in Minnesota schools.

"Acclaimed as a national model for world affairs programs," he said, "the Minnesota International Center inspires the Minnesota community to understand global issues and cultures in an ever-changing world."



Through MIC's "Classroom Connection," according to Hornik, each student receives a passport stamped by the international guest speakers from each country, which serves as a reminder of the day's experiences and multicultural purpose.

But at the end of World Cultures Day at Franklin, students had a lot more to take home with them than just that. They were shown a slide show of photos taken throughout the day of their interaction with the international speakers, as

well as time for reflections on what they learned and why it was important.

The question, "why a day like today is important" gave Franklin students a lot more to consider than why two plus two makes four - perhaps why one plus one from different cultures and backgrounds will be just as important in their very young but still future lives.