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Rutherford prepares goodbyes for Amity teacher

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Stillwater Courier - 05/14/2008

Sometimes it's hard to say goodbye.

That's why it helps to make goodbyes more fun.

On Thursday, students and staff at Rutherford Elementary School will celebrate the end of Spanish language and culture teacher Carolina Viña's year at the school with a celebration in her honor.

During the school day, students will present audiences with songs, information about Uruguayan culture, and an exhibition of *candombe*, a freeform style of Uruguayan dance that Viña has been rehearsing with them this week. Further, they will demonstrate their knowledge of Uruguay through computer-based presentations.

From 5-7 p.m., visitors will have a chance to see a reprise of the dancing, review the students' projects, eat cake and ice cream, and say their goodbyes to the teacher.

Viña, 28, of Montevideo, arrived at the school last September as an intern through a program sponsored by the Amity Institute, an international non-profit organization that pairs prospective teachers with schools in the United States. The Rutherford parent-teacher organization has sponsored an intern for each of the past three years.

During her time here, Viña has taught Spanish language and culture to each of the school's more than 500 students, through weekly, half-hour sessions. During this time, teacher Susie Mollegas has served as Viña's mentor, collaborating with the young teacher on lesson plans and easing her into the role of instructor in an American classroom.

Thursday's events will culminate those efforts, Mollegas said.

"For Carolina, this will be a chance for her to share her culture and country in a way that everyone can learn from," she said. "The kids have been working on different projects throughout the year and here they will showcase what they have learned for an audience. Essentially, what's happening is a celebration of Spanish and Uruguayan culture."

Specifically, the school's K-1 students will sing Spanish language songs that they learned over the past several months, while grade 2-3 students will appear in a video interview produced by grade 5-6 students concerning posters the younger students made about Uruguay. Likewise, grade 4 students will present a "podcast" interview they conducted with Viña concerning the Amity Program and her life back home. Further, some grade 5-6 students will present some tango music that they created. Numerous skits will punctuate the event.

"It's really kind of a spectrum of technology projects," Mollegas said.

The Spanish language instruction the Amity program provides fills a gap in the school's curriculum, said Nancy Meyer, who coordinates the program for the school's PTA.

Students have not had an in-house Spanish instructional program available to them since 1998, the school's first year of operation, when a grant made it possible for the school to devote funds for the purpose.

“Although this isn’t the same as having everyday Spanish instruction, it’s a step in the right direction,” Meyer said. “Everybody who has taken a foreign language knows that you pick up another quicker once you know one. ... It’s good for developing vocabulary skills, gaining a better grasp of English, and kids do better on ACT, SAT and college entrance exams. There’s really no end to the benefits.”

There are additional benefits for those who host visiting teachers, she said further.

Last year’s Amity intern, Monica Montes of Colombia, stayed with the Meyers family and she still keeps in touch.

“You know, that was one of the nice surprises. My two oldest boys got along so well with her, it was as if they were siblings. They even argued like siblings,” Meyer said. “And when you’re that close, you learn a lot about each other.”

Last week, Montes graduated from her university, and contacted her former host family to inform them of her accomplishment.

“We said ‘Congratulations!’ And she asked, ‘How’s [Meyer’s son] Mason? Is he going to come to Colombia to visit?’ ... We may eat different foods and speak different languages, but we’re so much alike.”



Carolina Viña helps a group of first grade students with choreographed dance moves while enacting a song in Spanish for a future presentation. (Photo by Andy Blenkush)