

'People are People' brings culture home

By Casey Hans
staff writer

Gregg Herning chose to study the Russian culture — timely because of the imminent break-up of the Soviet Union as we know it.

"There's a lot going on over there," he said.

Classmate Eric Feldman had a more personal reason for selecting to study it. "My father was born there," he added.

Both are sixth graders at Warner Middle School, and are students of teacher Bette Buckler who has introduced a cultural awareness unit this year designed to help students learn about different people and their different ways of living. It encouraged discussion of similarities and differences in an effort to bring a better understanding.

In addition to the Russian, students also studied Chinese, Japanese, Albanian, Spanish and Greek.

"I want them to be happy about school," Buckler explained. "I want them to like to come." According to one student, she achieved her goal with the two-week lesson.

Herning said the unit, which involved research, a hands-on project, and oral and written team reports, was great. "It's really fun," he said. "This is, like, the funnest thing I've ever done in school."

BUCKLER ATTENDED a four-day workshop through the Farmington Public Schools, and decided she was "going to be out of the classroom for four days. I'm going to make use of it." She wrote her own unit called "Understanding Cultures: People are People" and introduced it this year. Using a cultural series which ran in the Observer last summer as background, she obtained a list of predominant cultures in the area and worked with those.

"There are many, many people moving into our area. You are going to be going to school with these students. How will you cope?" Buckler asked, prompting

discussion after one presentation.

Teams comprised of five student studied the music, art, food, games, languages and holidays of their chosen culture which they put into a presentation and a report called a "culturgram."

In the presentation on Russian culture for example, students learned that a chicken costs 10,000 rubles, or \$100; that people traditionally drink a dozen glasses of hot tea a day (they like to warm their hands on the glass); and that a number of well-known music pieces including Peter and the Wolf and The Nutcracker came from the Russian culture.

In the Chinese culture playing the musical lute and the game of

dominoes are popular, and food delicacies include duck, pigeon eggs and shark skin soup.

Students made musical instruments, various food, and brought games into the class which they demonstrated how to play.

Buckler hopes to continue the unit with future classes, and hopes other teachers can also make use of it. "I would do this with any group," she said. "It's beneficial for any students to share ideas with each other."

"It's a good educational tool for them. I think it's important."

Students are also learning how to evaluate their presentations and projects as part of the unit.



photos by SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Gregg Herning shows the hollow bottom of a Russian cylindrical drum, fashioned for his presentation. Herning and four other students studied all aspects of Russian culture for their project.



Warner Middle School sixth grader Benji Satter holds his homemade lute that he used in his demonstration of music in Chinese culture while classmate Joel Jaye strums the strings.



photos by SHARON LAMIEUX/staff photographer

Barefoot young Chaldean women from Mercy dance a traditional wedding step, dressed in men and women's garments.



Dressed in traditional Kenyan garb, Mercy student Tessa Copprue laughs with other students during the cultural festivities.

Students work hard to bridge ethnic diversity

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only informational, but one of ethnic pride for the participants.

"Last year was the first year we did it," Mantena said. "We hoped this would help them learn to know each other."

The HRC members said the bazaar idea has encouraged Mercy students to talk about diversity one-on-one and to bring the issue into the classroom. Having the awareness helps in the classroom too.

"IT'S EASIER to learn," Ayala said. "You don't feel there's such a big wall."

The Human Relations Council has four students for each class level — freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. Also, students from other groups are invited to join the committee and staff members are represented. Teacher Mike Gruber is a faculty advisor on the HRC. He explained that the bazaar concept grew out of a traditional Black history celebration at the school, and students felt the need to expand the celebration.

The HRC group has changed at Mercy over the years, depending on the make-up of the student population and problems which might develop. Recently, the group worked to help students mingle in the cafeteria where many students would cluster in cultural groups. Also, 60 Mercy students recently went on a retreat to talk about racial harmony and other related issues.

"We just have to stay on our toes," added Mantena.

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