

The Post-Crescent (Appleton, Wisconsin)

June 22, 2008 Sunday

Art and language mix in summer camps aimed at opening doors

By Kara Patterson
Post-Crescent staff writer

Watching her daughter play with a Spanish-speaking friend at home and venture out with relatives overseas who speak Arabic convinced entrepreneur Christina Moubarak that language isn't a barrier for children.

Rather, it's a door to a global society.

"Kids before 10 can accept diversity much easier, much more willingly," said Moubarak, who transferred her past experience at the Fox Cities Chamber of Commerce in special projects to creating a new foreign language school called Belanno. "Their brains are able to acquire languages more quickly. You want them to become good global citizens, to see there really is not a difference in people."

To kick off Belanno's fall classes, Moubarak is offering summer camps in July and August that teach the basics of five languages Chinese, French, Spanish, Arabic and Hindi through games, activities and exercises that use the five senses.

The camps are geared to youth ages 4 to 13, who will be grouped by age and language proficiency levels in classes of 12 students at Appleton North High School.

"We're giving the kids the opportunity to feel like they went to a particular country," Moubarak said. "They'll eat the language, taste the language, play the language, see the language. We're running through all the five senses, we're going to catch all the kids."

The summer camps and language courses use a teaching method of total physical response, which means the students will be completely engaged in learning with their senses.

In Chinese language camp, for example, the students' experience likely will culminate with a mini-Olympics of Chinese sports, conducted in Chinese.

"We're not going to give the kids a vocab list," Moubarak said. "The teacher's going to come right in and start speaking the language right away and throw in gestures. That's the way the kids learn, through repetition. Eventually the kids figure out what it means because it's based on what's going on at the time. And they're going to be able to respond back. Of course, there's going to be some English words thrown in here and there."

In Hindi language camp, teacher Shakti Shukla plans to help her students play cricket, try yoga and sample Indian food. They'll also learn the Hindi alphabet, numbers and commonly spoken words. Shukla will reinforce that instruction with some arts and crafts, such as a bookmark on which the children will write their names in Hindi.

"I think the kids learn a lot more if they are creating something," said Shukla, an IndUS of Fox Valley directors board member. "I think the retention power is a lot more if you are using the different senses."

Scott Ozark of Neenah, whose children Emma, 8, and Daniel, 4, will attend the Chinese summer camp, said he likes this approach to learning a foreign language.

"Without actually leaving the country and spending time there to learn the language, I think this is as close as you can get to leaving the country," said Ozark, who said he learned some Chinese through self-taught courses and has tried to teach his children, but it's difficult that way.

"Kids have imaginations, and they are going to learn a lot faster than adults," Ozark said. "I wanted an enriching environment for the kids this summer."

The word "Belanno" is not a Spanish or Italian word. It's a combination of Moubarak's children's names: Bella, Andrei and Nolan. Coincidentally, the letters in the word also spell "Lebanon," and Moubarak's husband and children are of Lebanese descent.

"I thought a lot about the name being the first introduction to what people's perceptions would be," Moubarak said. "I ended up feeling I wanted it to represent my family, because they are the reason I put this together."

The registration deadline for the July camps is Wednesday, and the deadline to sign up for the August camps is July 25. A full listing of camp dates, a sample daily schedule and tuition costs is at www.belanno.com. Moubarak can be reached at 920-843-2214 or by e-mail at info@belanno.com

Kara Patterson's Words of Art column focuses on Fox Valley arts each Sunday. She's reachable at 920-993-1000, ext. 215, or kpatterson@postcrescent.com