

The Post-Crescent (Appleton, Wisconsin)

March 15, 2009 Sunday

Foreign language program starts kids early

By Kara Patterson

When preschooler Willy Mather of Appleton eats with his family at local Chinese restaurants, he likes to say "Hello" in Mandarin to servers and other native speakers there.

Willy, 5, and his sister Clare Mather, 6, a first-grader, study the official language of China and Taiwan on Tuesdays after school with a native speaker in a small class that includes the children of family friends.

They're among about 65 Fox Valley children, most of whom are between the ages of 5 and 10 years old, who are studying a foreign language this winter through Belanno, a foreign language school that entrepreneur Christina Moubarak opened with day camps in summer 2008 and a roster of classes in fall 2008.

"It's been a great gift to be able to give them and they've really embraced it and they really enjoy going," said Willy and Clare's mother, Sue Mather, who has observed some of her children's classes. "It's been a learning adventure together. I've learned some Chinese because of this."

Moubarak, Belanno's director, founded the school on the premise that foreign languages are not barriers to children, but instead are doors to a more global society. The school's name is a combination of her children's names: Bella, Andrei and Nolan.

This winter Moubarak employs nine instructors who teach a mixture of classes in Mandarin, Hindi, Japanese and Spanish, both at school sites and in Belanno's classroom on the second floor of City Center Plaza in downtown Appleton. Lessons for families or clusters of families, including in Arabic, are available upon request.

"There's just been some resistance in the community to learning Arabic, with people saying, do you teach religion," Moubarak said. "We don't teach religion in any of our classes."

However, she said, two local school systems have expressed interest in adding Arabic lessons to after-school or summer camp programming.

Belanno's enrollment numbers have incrementally increased from season to season. About 30 children attended the summer camps, and about 42 took fall classes. Class sizes typically don't exceed 10 students.

There are some caregiver-and-child classes for babies and toddlers, and parents can sit in with older children, Moubarak said.

"The method in which we teach is geared toward the children but the parents, they can learn quite a bit," she said.

Mandarin, Arabic, Hindi, Spanish and Japanese language camps are on tap for this summer. Moubarak is waiting to hear whether Belanno received a grant to help fund several of them.

The Mather children, who started their lessons in late August, know their colors, numbers, days of the week, and months of the year in Mandarin. They also can talk about the weather, different foods they like or don't like, and how they're feeling.

They're learning about China's culture along with basic communication skills. They practice eating snacks with chopsticks and celebrated the Chinese New Year.

Earlier this year Moubarak stopped by to visit, as she does with every class. The children were busy singing songs and answering their teacher in what half a year ago was to them a completely unfamiliar language.

"There was no English at all," Moubarak said. "Complete Chinese. I was so happy. It's almost like she tricked them into learning Chinese because they were just talking. That's the way it's supposed to be."

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