

Rockwell students learn about Latin culture

by Susan Singer-Bart | Staff Writer



Brian Lewis/The Gazette

Artist-in-residence Cecilia Esquivel plays a Latin tune on the guitar while third-graders Sean Craven and Jared Liscinsky dance in the background.



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Esquivel shows third-grader Allison Kwaloff how to play the berimbau.

For two weeks in April, the Lois P. Rockwell Elementary School music room was filled with Spanish and Portuguese songs as students learned about the cultures of Latin America through music.

Artist-in-residence Cecilia Esquivel introduced Rockwell's third- and fourth-graders to a variety of native instruments and songs. The children carried personal passports to record their musical journey.

Through interactive songs and musical games, students learned about the people of Latin America, their histories and legends, as well as the geography of the region.

Esquivel led the musical tour of the Americas with a map of the Western Hemisphere from its true perspective — not as seen on maps made in the United States — in the background.

“It puts the United States in the context of the Americas,” she said. “It tells kids America is all of that. It’s nice for them to be aware we are one component.”

Using a variety of native instruments, the Takoma Park resident and native of Argentina brought the histories of the countries alive. She squeezed a variety of instruments into each 45-minute class.

One class featured a guiro, a decorated hollowed gourd made from the fruit of the gourd tree; a cajon, a rectangularity shaped wooden box played like a drum; a berimbau, a wooden bow strung with a single metal string with a gourd tied to the bow and string; a cuatro, a tiny five-string guitar; and chajchas, a rattle made from dried sheep, llama or goat hooves.

Everyone got a chance to play the new instruments.

“They use material they can find [to make instruments],” said Nicole Prince, 9. Even deer hooves are used to make maracas, she said.

When not playing instruments, students acted out the songs or danced, following Esquivel’s prompting.

One fourth-grader told Esquivel her classes were “the best classes he’s had in his whole career.”

“Can somebody tell me one thing that you remember about today?” Esquivel asked before the end of class.

“A different language from Brazil,” said Devyn Beckwith, 8, recounting that people in the largest country in South America speak Portuguese.

The school’s regular music teacher, Suzanne Looper, prepared the children for their Latin music lessons and reviewed the new material on days when Esquivel was not at the school.

“This was a good opportunity to give kids exposure to Latin culture,” Principal Cheryl Clark said. “Our Latin population has grown significantly in the last couple of years.”

Last week, on Esquivel’s last day in the school, Rockwell held an assembly so third- and fourth-graders could share their new songs with parents and schoolmates. For the assembly, Esquivel was joined by guitarist Dani Cortaza from Paraguay and percussionist Martín Zúñiga from Peru, some of the regular musicians that integrate Esquivel’s group Cantaré, Latin American Music.

The artist-in-residence was paid by the school PTA and a grant from the Maryland State Arts Council Arts in Education program.

“This is not something we could do without their support,” Clark said.