

Common Ground: Hispanic contributions recognized

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When students recognize the significance and importance of each of other's culture, it can make a difference in the school environment.

During national Hispanic Heritage Month, students at the Math, Science and Arts Academy East in St. Gabriel displayed Latin culture through song skits, dance, artwork, food and student-made projects.

“We commemorated the rich history of our Hispanic brothers and sisters. We heard and saw important stories, and we received a true sense of a culture that is uniquely different,” said Frederick D’Wayne Bell II, MSA-East president.

Numbering 55 million in the U.S., Hispanics are the largest ethnic/racial minority group in America, according to 2014 U.S. Census figures.

The Latino presence in Louisiana in 2014 was 4.8 percent, 55 percent in California and 17.4 percent nationwide, census figures showed. In 45 years, Hispanics will make up about 28 percent of the country's population, according to census projections.

It's no wonder that schools and communities are recognizing Hispanic Americans as a major part of our country's “big pot gumbo,” said Bell, who helped host his school's fourth annual Hispanic Heritage Month celebration. “Our school is stronger because of Hispanic-Americans. Louisiana is stronger and America is stronger.”

MSA students studied the paintings of Frida Kahlo, a Mexican artist who won acclaim for her self-portraits, despite suffering from polio and chronic pain resulting from a bus accident.

“Kahlo went through a traumatic experience in her life, but she expressed it through her paintings,” said MSA student Alana Thibodeaux, who was inspired by the artist’s work. “She symbolized what she felt inside when she couldn’t express it in words.”

Thibodeaux is taking her third course in Spanish.

Hispanic-American student Hallie Rodriguez is thankful for events that spotlight her heritage.

“The celebration showed me things about the culture that I never knew,” Rodriguez said, adding she was surprised to learn that the school’s kindergarten through second-grade classes are learning Spanish.

“They will be fluent by the time they’re in high school,” she said. “Just seeing how the students are becoming so familiar with the culture is amazing.”

MSA’s Spanish Department Chairwoman Sara O’Neal said the school’s Hispanic population is small, but many students are taking Spanish classes.

“Some of these students come to us from Spanish-speaking countries and others are descendents from families who have come from Spanish-speaking countries,” she said. “During this month, we recognize that many Hispanics and Americans of Hispanic descent have made outstanding contributions to our nation.”

Warren is a freelance writer. She can be reached at chantewriter@hotmail.com.