



# Spanish Students Make a Difference

Allison Dethlefs

Señora Andrea Gonzalez hastily removed the CD and shuffled through another stack as the small group of girls in the back waited, stationed in the Marian teacher parking lot, for the field trip to commence. After failing to find the desired Reggae CD, the group settled with the Spanish radio station, and the van pulled out and headed towards South Omaha.

After a slight diversion involving a fallen light pole and 15 minutes of circling in hopes of finding an alternate route to cross the interstate, the motley crew made it to their destination. They watched as the passing signs and store fronts gradually changed from English to Spanish. Only four girls had turned up for the field trip, all first timers, but the chatter seemed as pleasant as the warm sunshine in the air as they pulled into an open parking spot on the corner of 24<sup>th</sup> and Q Street, ready for the Spanish Club's monthly excursion.

The girls and their moderator ambled down the sunny street, stopping to admire the elaborate, brightly-colored quinceañera dresses hanging from windows in passing shops. Gonzalez explained about the huge parties, or fiestas, that girls are traditionally thrown when they turn 15 in many Spanish-speaking cultures.

Before long, the group had made its way to a street vendor selling cheap Hispanic food such as burritos, tacos and quesadillas. But there were a few unusual items as well: pigs tongue... The girls, who were

encouraged to make their requests in Spanish, ordered and then sat in the sun to eat their meal and enjoy each other's company.

After dinner came a visit to the local pottery shop, World of Mexican Pottery, where they explored rows upon rows of ceramic creations, from statues of the Virgin Mary to a basement maze of precariously stacked chimineas and pots taller than the girls themselves.

Next stop was the local bakery, La Flor de Mexico, where the girls enjoyed picking out an assortment of colorful and delicious-looking pastries, each for 50 cents. Back in the car the girls split and shared their treats, trying not to get powdered sugar all over the seats or their uniforms. As the last of the pastries disappeared and the hand sanitizer emerged, the van pulled up to its real destination, the purpose for the Spanish Club field trip: Assumption Guadalupe.

The group arrived just in time for Assumption's monthly Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting at which the four Marian girls agreed to take care of a group of mostly bilingual kids, while their parents sat through the hour-long meeting.

Gonzalez, in addition to teaching at Marian, is a part time Spanish teacher at St. Bernard. She has been an active participant in the affairs of Assumption Guadalupe. She noticed how much trouble was caused at the monthly PTO meetings due to the fact that many families were forced to bring their children with them, which created a difficult environment for both the parents and the kids who shared the meeting room. This prompted Gonzalez's idea to use her newfound Spanish Club

to help meet the school's needs, while giving the students an opportunity to practice their Spanish in a naturally conducive environment.

Since the beginning of this school year, Gonzalez and Spanish teacher, Señor Andrew Bauer, have been taking groups, usually between four to 10 students, downtown to experience South Omaha.

The girls were ushered into the gym to wait for the kids' arrival. Minutes later, as the lights began to flicker on, two little, shy girls peeked into the open gym doors, one clutching her stuffed doll tightly. Soon, a whole host of children followed, including Gonzalez's two daughters. Several of the boys immediately headed for the basketball racks while freshmen Claire Adams and ChaRae Brown tried to organize a game of line tag with the rest of the group.

Senior Morgan Lofgren, noticed the timid little girl with the doll standing apart, and before long, the two of them were sitting on the floor gently tossing a basketball back and forth. Spontaneous gymnastics lessons began on the small blue mat by the bleachers for those who wanted to learn how to do a cartwheel, paired with a short game of duck-duck-goose.

The girls spent the last 15 minutes teaching the dwindling group of kids the Marian Beat. When the parents came to collect their children, they found them focused in a round

of clapping and snapping as the kids tried to outdo their friends. It was a little after 7 p.m., time to head back to Marian. This month's field trip was over.

Despite their small group size, or maybe because of it, all of the girls found the trip both beneficial and enjoyable. "I always thought going to the PTO sounded fun, but I

had never gone before," freshman Claire Adams said. "Mrs. Gonzalez called everyone over the intercom to come to the PTO. I thought that it would be a good first time to go."

Adams said she enjoyed seeing a new part of the city, being exposed to Spanish speakers and, more than anything, playing with the kids.

"My favorite part of it was when all the kids were gathering around, asking to be picked up and spun around. It made my arms hurt really bad after a while, but it was totally worth it. They were all smiles and laughs. They were adorable," Adams said.

Adams also appreciated the chance to practice a bit of her Span-

ish through the experience, both with the kids and with her peers. "ChaRae and I were asking the kids some questions in Spanish, like what their names were, how old they were," Adams said. "We would ask them how to say this or that in Spanish, which was really interesting. In the car ride back to school, Mrs. Gonzalez's little girls were playing a game with us where they'd say a word in Spanish. Then, we had to tell them what it meant in English, and vice versa."

Activities such as the PTO meetings are not the only things that this new, active Spanish Club will be participating in and hosting in the near future. Now that she has established the club, Gonzalez has high hopes and an extensive list of plans for next year's group.

One of the first barriers she has come up against is the club's lack of officers and solid leadership. "All I have is an army of freshman. [The club] has been so inactive, upper classmen haven't stepped up." She hopes to select officers for next year sometime in April, and she will start preparing for next year during summer break.

Gonzalez has been excitedly planning activities since she was put in charge of the Spanish Club at the beginning of the year. Her ideas for the group include Spanish movie nights, joint ethnic bake sales with French Club and Baking Club, sponsoring dances for Assumption Guadalupe and doing other service projects around the community.

She would like to bring a native Spanish speaker in to Mesa Española once a month, who would offer a cooking class and explain and demonstrate the making of a traditional Hispanic dish. Gonzalez has also thought of giving girls the opportunity to tutor Spanish-speaking adults at Assumption Guadalupe in a conversational, relaxed environment so that both groups can learn from each other.

One other idea she proposed was taking a group of girls interested in pursuing international business or medicine down to the immigration office. They would be able to talk to an immigration lawyer and then visit the clinic One World Community Health Center, a clinic in South Omaha that serves a majority of Spanish speaking patients. This would give girls the chance to speak with professionals about the practical

uses for Spanish in the workplace and give examples of job opportunities they would be able to pursue.

By helping students to expand their knowledge and experience of Spanish outside of the classroom, Gonzalez hopes to instill within

them a love of the language and emphasize the growing importance of learning another language.

"I think it's important for everyone to be open to other cultures," she said. She understands that it can be an uncomfortable or even scary experience to interact with people who speak a different language. But, she also stresses the importance of going outside of one's comfort zone and trying nonetheless.

"What we don't know, we fear; what we fear, we run away from. But the more you experience it, the more comfortable you become with it," Gonzalez said.

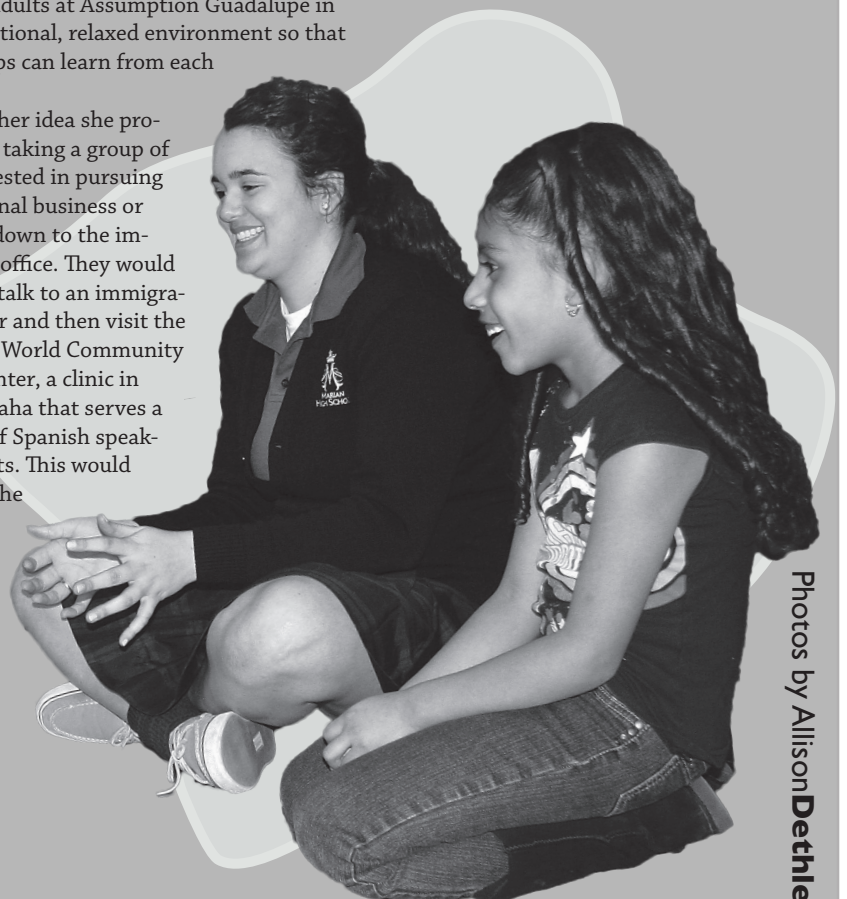
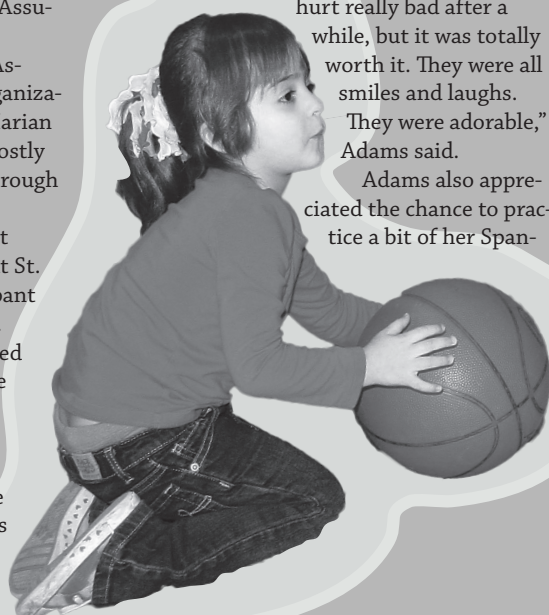
Gonzalez said it was good for the girls to see kids who are 5 or 6 years old and are bilingual because it helped boost the girls' confidence to try speaking Spanish. Gonzalez insisted that it was more about the effort put into learning than talent or skill. "You don't have to be good at a language, you just have to be willing to learn and make mistakes."

Gonzalez hopes that the Spanish Club will give girls with a passion for Spanish and service the chance to move beyond the classroom and put their interest into action. Unlike the "let's meet a few times a year, make a t-shirt and eat some chips and salsa" Spanish Club of years past, Spanish Club is finally ready to make a difference, both in the lives of the students and the people they serve.

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**Giving Back.** Freshman Claire Adams and ChaRae Brown chat with Gonzalez's youngest daughter during Assumption Guadalupe's PTO meeting. The next PTO field trip will be April 12 at 4 p.m. at Marian.



Photos by Allison Dethlefs