

Charlottesville Festival of Cultures: EL/Civics in Action

By Susan Erno and Debra Tuler

Charlottesville's first Annual Festival of Cultures began, as most things do, with an idea. Our increasing diversity hit home last fall when we realized we had a class with 16 students from 16 different countries with 16 different native languages. The richness and challenges of a diverse population was seeping into the schools, workplace, and the fabric of daily life. Native Charlottesvilleians saw people waiting at the bus stop in traditional dress but how much did either group know about each other?

Our philosophy of civics has consistently focused on a dual purpose: to prepare learners for successful transition into all aspects of community life and to prepare the community to better understand and interact with their newest residents. We believe that to become effective participants in the community ESL learners need not only to understand their rights and responsibilities and how to navigate in American society, but also to engage in a process of mutual information sharing with others.

Thus, the purpose of the Festival was multi-fold: to celebrate the cultural diversity in our community; to increase awareness of that diversity; and to build a bridge of communication between newcomers and established residents in the Charlottesville area. We envisioned the Festival as a 'gathering place' where all could come together to celebrate, take pride in, and share the multiple cultures found in our community.

The planning committee, under the direction of Debra Tuler and Heidi Gordon, ESL instructors and coordinators of the Festival, consisted primarily of ESL learners. Planning this event provided learners an opportunity to take on leadership roles and to engage in community outreach. We met monthly at the start and then more frequently as the Festival date neared. The committee, as well as other students, helped with all aspects of the Festival from coming up with the overall plan and idea, finding sponsors, recruiting participants, and publicity to performing.

The Festival was a colorful and joyful celebration and a huge success with over 400 in attendance. It took place on a sunny day in May in Lee Park, near the Downtown pedestrian mall. It included entertainment -music, dance, and storytelling -, cultural exhibits, hands-on craft activities, craft vendors, and information booths from organizations that serve the ESL population. The entertainment, exhibits and crafts spanned the globe. One hands-on activity, the creation of a multicultural unity tree, demonstrated that the globe could be found right here in our city.

The benefits of the Festival for learners included that they became leaders and teachers connected to each other and the larger community. In addition, they learned about services offered to them in the community, such as, health, interpretation services, the transit system, other educational opportunities, and more. And finally, it satisfied an articulated need to give back to the community by sharing their culture and talents. At the same time the larger community learned about and appreciated both the rich diversity in our midst and common interests. "Family is everything." was written on a leaf for the

unity tree. Watching the families and friends singing, dancing, and playing together, you couldn't help but agree.

The Festival of Cultures was a project of the Charlottesville City Schools Adult Education Program. It was partially funded by an English Language/Civics Grant. For further information, contact Susan Erno, Adult Education Program Coordinator at 434 245-2817 or email: susan.erno@ccs.k12.va.us