

summer camps

Fostering cultural curiosity at camp

By Owen Eagan

• A record number of Americans — 77 percent in a Gallup survey late last year — say the country is sharply divided, but one Washington, D.C., summer camp wants to help bring people together by teaching children to recognize the worth of diverse cultures from around the world.

"The purpose of Kids and Culture Camp is to expose children to other cultures, to introduce them to international affairs at an early age and to help them develop a love and appreciation for learning about people around the globe," Executive Director Jania Otey said.

Founded in 2010 by a group of mothers, including Otey, to serve a small number of children, the camp has since expanded, with more than 200 children ages 3 to 12 participating last year.

During four weeklong sessions spanning June 26 to July 21, campers this summer will survey one country each week, engaging in a variety of activities that aim to introduce them to that country's geography and cultural heritage, including its language, local traditions, music, art and cuisine.

This year, the campers will experience "Haiti's Heroic Heritage," "Italy's Impressive Identity," "Nigeria's Notable Narrative" and the "Philippines' Phenomenal Fame."

Depending on their age group, campers get to try their hands at painting and sculpting, singing and dancing, cooking ethnic foods and even performing chemistry



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The Kids and Culture Camp's purpose is to expose children to other cultures and expand their knowledge of the world, their community and their peers.

experiments. Physical education is also wrapped into the program, with children able to play outside.

Children ages 6 and up also get field trips that relate to the country of study. Journeys in past years have included visits to various Smithsonian Institution museums, as well as a boat ride

on the Anacostia River.

According to Otey, the variety of camp activities helps to fill an educational gap for the children who participate, supplementing what she sees as a Euro-centric curriculum with knowledge of the world's far-flung peoples and cultures.

"There's a lot of influence on European culture, but not

necessarily on, you know, cultures from different places," Otey said. "So I think we do a pretty good job of filling the void."

Aiding in this instructional effort are expert speakers, usually people who are either native to the countries in focus or who have spent a significant amount of time residing within them. Staffers from the Smithsonian sometimes make appearances, along with various cultural performers.

Jamia Eaton, deputy director of camp operations and marketing, said that these experts also assist in training the camp's regular staff in teaching their lessons in the correct key.

"Usually, with our teachers, they get training from a person that's native to that country or that is very familiar with it," Eaton said.

The average age of campers at Kids and Culture trends younger, Otey said. In 2015, the 3-to-5 age group held close to half of the campers, with the remainder spread between ages 6 to 12.

Otey said in recent years that the camp has received children from every ward in Washington, so that in addition to discovering world cultures, children also learn about their peers of different backgrounds.

"We not only want to teach children about other cultures, but we also want them to be able to be in class with children of other cultures, interact with their peers, learn to appreciate them, appreciate their differences and appreciate their similarities," she said.

According to Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, who serves as director of the Center for Intercultural Dialogue, this social component of the camp could be the most essential in developing a cosmopolitan outlook in children over preconceived or cartoon notions.

"I mean, there's nothing like real knowledge of an individual to destroy a stereotype," she said.

Leeds-Hurwitz, also a professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin, Parkside, added that in the modern American cultural environment, the purpose of the Kids and Culture Camp is critical to the nation.

"The goal of introducing intercultural dialogue and intercultural knowledge to kids is hugely important and needs to happen much more in this country," Leeds-Hurwitz said.

At the camp, each week culminates in "Festival Friday," an event open to parents where campers take the stage, offering a performance related to the country that they examined over the week, often in the form of a song, a dance or a dramatic sketch. Food native to the nation in question is sometimes served.

At one of these festivals last year, Otey said a realization struck her about her ideal vision of America and about the role that her camp plays in achieving it.

Looking out at the collected children and parents of differing backgrounds, Otey said she thought: "This was what America should be like, with us all gathered together and celebrating cultures instead of bringing each other down. ... And I think we're able to get that across to our campers at an early age."

This year, the Kids and Culture Camp will take place at the D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, with a secondary location at Shining Stars Montessori Academy PCS.

The cost of one session for those registering before April 15 is \$250, with an additional \$50 for early-morning care and \$70 for after-camp care. After April 15, the cost of registration will be \$260 per session. Discounts are available in special circumstances.

The tailored Smithsonian camp experience for entrepreneurs

By Aida Chavez

• More and more, summer camps can tailor experiences to hone certain skills: There are camps for future doctors, sailors and scientists, among many others.

Among its more than 90 camp choices, which explore everything from photography to improv comedy, the Smithsonian Institution now offers an educational experience for tomorrow's entrepreneurs.

The Smithsonian Associates' summer camp "Shark Tank: Big Ideas" is based off the ABC television series, which features budding entrepreneurs getting the chance to pitch their ideas to industry tycoons in hopes of landing a potentially life-changing deal. The camp is aimed toward children in the fifth and sixth grades.

Students at the "Shark Tank" camp first will visit the Air and Space and American History museums to learn about ideas that changed the world, in order to get their imaginations running. They then get to develop their own inventions and pitches.

The Smithsonian has been holding summer camps

for nearly 50 years, but "Shark Tank" is only in its second year. Brigitte Blachere, program manager for Smithsonian Associates, says "it's all about the kids," and the best part is watching campers learn.

"In this camp, it's based on the television show, but the idea is that each of the campers will come up with or devise something in response to something they see is a problem," Blachere said. "They're given a challenge first, either in conservation or sustainability or water. They're given a theme."

But the students don't just come up with a concept — they also create the object or invention.

"They create it, then they have to sell it and we have the parents come in," Blachere said. "There's fake money, and they have to come up and sell their product, then they have to negotiate with the person."

Blachere said the campers learn important skills "not only learning about invention and the idea of creating, solving a problem through their creative ideas," but they're also learning about "economics and how to sell a product." She said kids get to ask themselves how much someone would pay for the

product and how much they should receive.

Some of the campers wind up excelling at the creative aspect of the activity, while others do better at the presentation and negotiation, Blachere said.

Blachere said it's impossible for her to pick a favorite Smithsonian camp.

"They all have their own personality and they take on their own personality once the kids get there," she said. "Teachers sometimes start with these elaborate plans, but then the kids come in and make it their own, their own takes on the object they're learning about, too."

She often hears back from parents about how the skills a kid learned at one of the camps ended up benefiting them at a future date, at times resulting in a good grade, saying sometimes the kids "didn't know that they were learning something."

"Every year someone surprises me," Blachere said. "They really have learned to surprise me, which is great; it's what they should be doing. The idea of our camp is to enjoy the Smithsonian, have some fun and spend your summer in a unique environment."