

Bilingual camp has students talking

Program teaches confidence, leadership to English-Spanish speakers

by Emily Weiner

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photo by Ben Arnold



Eddie Morales stands in front of a mural he is painting at Nooksack Valley High School. Morales started the mural late in his sophomore year and said the countries depicted in his mural by flags and various scenes represent the places students have come from as well as the places they want to go.

Navigating the physical challenge course last summer during Bilingual Leadership Development Camp helped Eddie Morales learn to trust people, because he had to depend on them to catch him.

When the 18-year-old returned to Nooksack Valley High last year, the big risk was speaking English. His camp experience made him say to himself, "Why not do it? Just do it!"

"When I was afraid, I'd say nothing and they'd be afraid of me," he said. But when he started speaking to them, students began speaking back.

For Morales, who had moved from Mexico, and seven other Nooksack students who attended, the camp helped not only their skills but also their confidence.

This summer, Morales was asked back as a junior counselor, and Nooksack again sent seven delegates, half the total attendees. Scholarships and state programs for migrant families covered the cost, about \$300 per delegate. The five-day camp, launched last year by the Association of Washington School Principals, ended Friday.

Morales said being at camp the first summer made him want to help his friends. "I kind of want them to get more involved in the activities of the school," he said. "They just come, then go home and do their homework. I was like that."

Vicky Walkinshaw, who teaches English language learners at Nooksack Valley High and the middle school, said her students often have incredible leadership skills in their own language but are invisible to the rest of the school community. She said students came back from camp last summer ready to join school clubs. Because "community service" is a term employed at leadership camp, they came back eager to participate. "In their towns in Mexico, it was just natural, being in the community, you'd help others. But they didn't know it was called 'community service.'"

The students also came back more committed to continuing their education and what they needed to do, said Linda King, who retired this June after teaching English at Nooksack Valley High.

"They came back not just with the generalities, but 'here's the next step.'"

The camp teaches communication skills and requires each delegate to make several presentations.

"It's a place to really feel welcome, no matter what language you speak," said Vince Perez, the camp's director. "All the presentations are in both Spanish and English." Perez said students can speak in whichever language they feel most comfortable, but are challenged to try their second language.

The majority of camp students have Spanish speakers in their homes, and much of the staff speaks Spanish. But the camp is open to all languages.

Joe Fenbert, the camp's assistant director, said it's difficult for many bilingual students to go to a place where they don't know anybody - and for their parents to let them. Of 40 students from across the state signed up to attend this year, only 28 showed up.

So the agenda was modified, and delegates brainstormed about ways to make it easier for their peers to attend next summer. Fenbert said at camps for high school students already active in school government, fewer than 1 percent are no-shows. Morales credits King and Walkinshaw with Nooksack's large participation.

"They worry about us, and they are always looking for places like this camp to send us," he said. "Not all the schools have people like that."

Leading through language

by Stacey Palevsky Tri-City Herald, Sunday, August 14th, 2005

CHEWELAH -- Tome mi mano, he said in Spanish. Take my hand.

Don't even think about falling down, he added in English.

Daniel Valencia reached out to Sonni Garcia, who grabbed his arm to regain her balance.

She was, after all, on a tightrope that just a moment ago violently shook beneath her sneakers.

Valencia, a sophomore at Kennewick High School, and Garcia, a senior at Kamiakin High, were two of 10 students from across the state who had to figure out how to get from one end of the rope to the other without touching the ground.

At first, they worked independently, each trying to figure out how to cross. They shouted ideas at each other in a mixture of Spanish and English.

But alone, they fell.

Fall off, start over. They weren't getting very far.

Until they realized they needed to work as a team. More than an hour later, they did it.

The ropes challenge was part of the second annual Bilingual Leadership Camp, a five-day retreat held north of Spokane designed to empower Washington's Hispanic youth.

"These kids are flying below the radar, trying not to be noticed," said camp staffer Karen Skoog of Bellevue. "But they're a rich, powerful population we're trying to bring out and see be a positive change in their community."

Hispanic leaders

Vincent Perez, a 1994 Kennewick High graduate, created the camp in 2004 when he noticed Hispanic students were underrepresented in student government and other school clubs. The effort was an extension of the work he already was doing in Randle at the Cispus Learning Center, the headquarters for Washington's leadership programs.



The camp at Chewelah Peak Learning Center is one of eight Washington summer camps that promotes leadership development. The other leadership camps, held at Cispus and designed for students who are elected high school officers, have been around since 1956.

The bilingual camp is the newest addition and the only one that specifically reaches out to Hispanic youth who have the ability to be leaders at their schools, but have not yet done so.

All present understood English and Spanish, though their conversational skills in each language varied. Some students spoke mostly in Spanish, like Valencia, who moved to Kennewick from Colombia,

South America, last September. Some didn't speak any Spanish, like Garcia, whose family has been in the United States for three generations.

Many students used both languages in the same sentence.

"We're celebrating that we're bilingual," said Alyssa St. Hillaire, a camp staffer and Kamiakin Spanish teacher. "I think they are more willing to take risks because they're comfortable."

While the linguistics may be different than at other Washington leadership camps, the intent is the same: give students the tools to make their school a better place.

For many of the camp's 28 students, it's the first time they've thought about what it means to be a leader and how they can change or improve their school.

"At Cispus, we were serving students who were already going to make it," Perez said. "I wanted to give (Hispanic) kids a leadership opportunity who typically aren't going to have it."

The program has its kinks. Of the 38 students who registered for the retreat, only 28 showed up.

At the more veteran Cispus, there are fewer no-shows, and there are 250 kids registered for a total of eight sessions.

"The lesson we learned is that connections must be established between a local contact and a student," Perez said. This year's group was twice as big as last year's, Perez noted. To ensure all who register next summer show up for camp, he plans to have more direct contact with parents.

Learning the ropes

The ropes course at Chewelah has five tightropes zig-zagged between six trees.

The students fell off the ropes every time they tried to cross. Frustration flashed across their faces.

After 20 minutes of fruitless attempts, Garcia noticed a small piece of rope dangling from the top of one of the trees.

"Can we use this?" Garcia asked.

Skoog, the staff member who had quietly watched to make sure no one got hurt, gave them the go-ahead.

The students quickly figured out they could hold onto the extra rope while leaning back for balance to easily cross one section of the course.

They also figured out they



needed each other.

"You can't do it all by yourself," Garcia said when they finished.

Miriam Tapia, another Kamiakin senior, added, "I learned that when you're a leader, you're not just there for yourself, but you have to be there to help others in whatever they may need."

Cooperation is a reoccurring theme at Chewelah Peak Learning Center. While staff members regularly challenge

kids to think about how they, as individuals, can get more involved at school, they always remind them that it's never a solo effort.

Each activity in which the kids participated reflects that idea. It's all hands-on.

"Leadership is not something you do for an hour in the morning," Skoog told the group during an evening program. "It's a way you choose to live."

For instance, she said, leadership is not just serving on student council. It's saying, "Thank you" to the janitor, or inviting someone to eat lunch at your table who would otherwise sit alone.

"That's the leadership you can do no matter if you're elected or nominated. No importante," Skoog added. "... Begin to live like a person who wants to make a difference in the world."

Bringing it back
Student leaders

are the heart and soul of any school, said Joe Fenbert, assistant camp director.

"You guys need to know you have a big, big impact on your school by what you do and what you don't do," he told the students.

It was July 27, the third night of camp, and the students already had worked for 12 hours that day. Several more hours of activities and group discussions awaited.



Fenbert told them to break up into 10 groups by school and brainstorm how to take what they learned at camp and apply it to school. The groups ranged in size from two to six students.

The representatives from Kamiakin High, where about 8 percent of the 1,400 students are Hispanic, want to start a Latino Club. Other students suggested starting a Latino tutoring club, a History of Chicanos class or making a senior project out of starting a M.E.Ch.A Club (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan, or in English, The Chicano/a student movement of Aztlan).

The ideas flowed, and so did the encouragement. Raucous applause greeted each school after the students presented their strategies. Camp staff said they hoped the supportive environment gave students enough confidence to last until they returned to school.

Many of the students talked about returning next summer, either as a camper or as a junior counselor. Miriam Tapia already has started to fill out the application for a counselor slot.

"I learned to go for it," she said, "and I would love to help others have that."