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*Elroy Johnson IV and Mimi Ubani
in traditional Nigerian dress
photo by Chris Johnson*



Culture Club

By Tricia Musslewhite

AS HIGH SCHOOL students in the Frisco Independent School District (FISD) return to the classroom later this month, they will be able to study United States, European and World history; foreign languages such as Spanish, French and German; and numerous other courses that teach about the people and customs of other countries and cultures. Students will participate in traditional coursework – reading textbooks and listening to lectures. But as Frisco’s population grows, so do the opportunities for students to learn firsthand about the experiences of others from around the globe through a special group of instructors: their peers.

Demographic statistics measured by the district reflect what might be expected for a suburb in the Metroplex: 63 percent of FISD students are white, 14 percent Hispanic, 12 percent African-American and 11 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. It may be surprising, however, to learn there are 59 languages represented in the FISD and, at Centennial High School alone, the student population

represented the culture of approximately 80 countries during the 2007-2008 school year.

In 2005 a Centennial sophomore noticed something about his fellow students. Elroy “E.J.” Johnson IV had participated in mission trips to Guatemala, an experience that sparked his interest in learning about other cultures and languages. What Elroy noticed was the Centennial student body sat in cultural cliques on opposite sides of the cafeteria and diversity issues, such as the nation’s immigration policies, would drive apart the student body and cause classmates to feel isolated. He wondered if his fellow classmates knew anything about the other cultures found within the school. So with the support of the school’s administration and a faculty sponsor, Elroy began to recruit students for Centennial’s Culture Awareness Club to provide an opportunity “to let everyone understand everyone else’s culture because a lot of times people get misrepresented. Not one person

knows everything about someone else,” he said.

Drawing from his African-American heritage and to celebrate Black History Month, Elroy asked his grandfather to help create more understanding within the student body and speak at one of the club’s first events. Students sampled traditional greens and gumbo prepared by Elroy’s mother and grandmother as they listened to stories of what it was like to grow up in North Texas in the days of segregation. They marveled at stories about a carefully planned driving trip from Dallas to Houston that included scheduled restaurant and bathroom stops at places that would allow blacks.

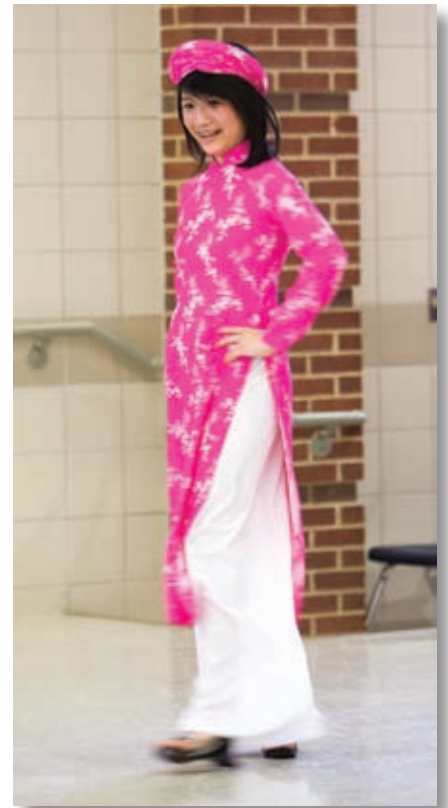
“His presentation was without rancor, bitterness or animosity and it was fascinating for those who had never even considered the realities of segregation’s impact on personal freedoms and respect, or lack thereof, for other human beings,” says the Culture Awareness Club sponsor and Centennial teacher William “Buzz” Priestley.

Students also have shared experiences and insights about their respective cultures with the goal being identifying the similarities and differences among cultures. “We find we have more in common than we thought being from different cultures. It opens more people’s eyes to the similarities,” says Elroy.

“Anytime we generate more awareness and emphasize the values of other countries, people and cultures, we all come away richer for the shared experience,” says Mr. Priestley. “When students can share ideas and experiences with others from around the world, we are all the better for it. And, being able to offer students from other countries a chance to stand up, take pride, share their unique heritage, and learn that people everywhere are pretty much the same, offers everyone the opportunity to gain insights and awarenesses about ourselves and others we previously did not have.”



International Festival Day Fashion Show participants



photos by Chris Fritchie

COMMON THEME

Across town a Frisco High School student was taking note of her school's diverse population and wondering about student attitudes concerning diversity. Brittney Beaman, also African-American, surveyed her fellow students and learned her classmates thought Frisco High School – actually all people – could do more to recognize the growing number of cultures now represented in their city and school. “The students were comfortable with society in general lacking recognition of certain cultures,” says Brittney.

To increase cultural awareness within Frisco High, Brittney approached her teachers about starting an international club and learned of a forthcoming Diversity Task Force. She collaborated with teachers to organize the task force and is excited about the opportunity it will afford. “Students who don't feel comfortable going to teachers or their counselors about race issues can go to people on the diversity task panel to discuss issues they're facing relating to racial issues,” says Brittney. “That's what I really like about the task force. We can openly discuss as students what we're

going through.” And, while students will have issues to resolve as cultures clash, Mr. Priestley, Elroy and Brittney agree the challenges among students are few.

“Our students seem to be incredibly tolerant, understanding and open to other cultures. They are continually put together in a wide variety of classes and work together productively, compatibly and successfully,” says Mr. Priestley.

Language barriers, religious practices and the occasional cultural faux pas are the most common challenges. Accommodations are made in school to respect a student's cultural customs, holidays, diets, etc.

“There aren't many options about religious holidays. If a student has a legitimate religious holiday, they get the day off and are responsible for missed work, just like if they were home ill. If a student's religion requires they pray at a certain time, their religious requirements are respected and accommodated,” says Mr. Priestley.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

Centennial and Frisco High moved forward with their own independent

culture and diversity efforts until Elroy and Brittney connected through the Independent Study and Mentorship class, an Fisd program that helps students identify career interests. The two seniors – now graduates – found they shared an interest in international affairs. This fall Elroy plans to study international marketing at Abilene Christian University and Brittney will major in journalism with an emphasis on foreign correspondence at the University of Missouri. The students teamed up for their final project: Fisd's International Festival.

Elroy brought to the project his experience with Centennial's International Festival Day, an event sponsored by the Culture Awareness Club in 2007. Brittney approached the project with the opinions of her fellow students in mind and set a goal of representing all cultures, an effort that is being described today by some diversity experts as creating a salad bowl instead of a melting pot, or recognizing individuals for their distinct characteristics rather than merging together into a single homogeneous culture.

“I wanted the Frisco community to

realize we have people from El Salvador, Nicaragua and Brazil. We're a culturally diverse growing city and I felt it was time we celebrate, recognize and appreciate all the different cultures that Frisco has," Brittney said.

Students from Liberty High School joined a team of students from Centennial and Frisco High to organize the International Festival. As the president of Frisco High's Spanish Club, Brittney used the club as a tool to propel the festival.

"There was a great deal of camaraderie and a wide expansion of acquaintances that spanned the three participating high schools," says Mr. Priestley.

After all the planning, the International Festival finally took place last April. More than 300 students and their families attended which was alive with the sights, sounds and tastes of approximately 50 different ethnic groups. The room was filled with food, musical instruments, art, textiles and native costumes from Sweden, Columbia, Nigeria, Vietnam and many other cultures that contribute to the success of the community and school

district. Collin College's International Association provided Indian performers. There was another group of performers from a Persian dance school. "We also had an Asian hip hop group which was probably the most anticipated group," says Elroy. Most important to the group was breaking down stereotypes. Elroy says, "A lot of people think Asians are always in their books so they thought it was a good idea to put a group together. They did an Asian hip hop performance and it was really cool."

"Everyone was able to see the native costumes and attire, taste the food and be open about trying different foods and interact," says Brittney. "That is what got me most excited. Seeing people interact; go up to the poster boards and speak with the people representing the countries. Every single person I saw was interacting and they were enjoying themselves. It was very personal, but at the same time they were enjoying it like it was a festival. I felt we had a wonderful outcome."

"The International Festival was an event that exceeded all expectations and

I was personally moved as I stood back watching this amazing homogeneity of so many students from so many countries and cultures come together and have such a good time," says Mr. Priestley. "There are a lot of places in the world where that is simply not possible."

"The whole point of the International Festival was to bring the community together to celebrate and recognize that Frisco is very diverse," adds Brittney. "We need to appreciate the diversity we have so we can move forward. We need to feel comfortable with other races. That was my main goal: for everyone to be open and have their eyes opened to worldly cultures."

When you visit your son or daughter at school this fall, don't be alarmed if you hear native music playing as classes change or observe students and teachers dancing in the hallways. The students are simply being exposed to various cultures, learning to appreciate their own culture and, most importantly, they're learning.

Tricia Musslewhite is a freelance writer living in Frisco.

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