

Linking adopted kids, their culture

Latin American children learn traditional music, arts, crafts

By John Brewer

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Gus Haugen remembers the first day he went to La Semana, a weeklong camp for kids adopted from Latin American countries.

The hesitation the 5-year-old from Paraguay felt at the time melted away when he walked into the Monday morning assembly.

"Everybody there looked like me. It let me know that I'm not alone, that I'm able to talk to people with the same experiences as me," Haugen, now 18, said recently.

The camp — founded by a group of adoptive mothers 30 years ago — convenes annually at All Saints Catholic Church in Lakeville. This year, 450 campers from 14 states will converge for the Aug. 1-5 gathering, learning about their home countries and cultures.

Classes for the kindergarten-through-12th grade campers focus on language and arts and crafts and are all parent-led, said Jean Heyer, a mother of two campers, both from Colombia.

"It's just great to be with other families who have had their families put together through adoption and they have the common background of being Latin American," she said.

When she and her husband, former Pioneer Press music writer Jim Walsh, adopted their son 16 years ago, Heyer said they didn't know any other parents with adopted children. The camp helped to change that, she said.

"I think living in Minnesota, it's the one time you are with a bunch of kids and you don't know which one is yours. It's great for (them) in that way because they're not in the minority," she said.

The camp's appeal keeps kids and their families coming back year after year, Heyer and Haugen said.

The camp is so popular that registration typically fills up early.

Campers take over most of the space at All Saints.

The week is full of lessons meant to foster a better understanding of Latin American culture and history, Heyer said, and campers are able to discuss topics around adoption.

Haugen, who graduated from Southwest High School this spring, will help lead a group of second-graders at La Semana ("The Week" in Spanish).

Even after he starts attending the University of Tampa in the fall, he said he'll come back to help.

"It's like a whole big family," he said.

The week wraps up with a showcase of traditional dances — including the first-graders' annual rendition of a cumbia and the older kids' free-form dance to modern Latin American music.

Haugen said the butterflies he felt as a 5-year-old have flitted off as he's gotten older.

"It's been one of the most positive experiences of my life. It's definitely changed it, opened up my mind to the other adopted kids out there," he said. "Everybody's got a different story to tell. It's good to learn from their experiences and incorporate that into your life."

Heyer said the effect is the same for parents.

"It's pretty incredible. It's a very moving week," she said.

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TO KNOW MORE

The 2011 La Semana camper roster is full, and parent Jean Heyer recommended signing up before March 2012 for next year's session. For more information, go to lasemana.org.