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Students Gain Insight into Asian Cultures

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VALDOSTA -- Mathis City Auditorium was transformed into a continental paradise Friday as part of the Asian Cultural Experience Festival. Its diverse group of native inhabitants welcomed hundreds of local middle school students into their world, introducing them to their individual countries' cultures.

"It's wonderful being able to teach the American people about my heritage, customs, and way of life," said Am Burchfield, a native of Thailand who moved to the United States 26 years ago. American-born Anu Goel, whose family is from India, shared her neighbor's enthusiasm. She said it's a lot of fun sharing information about her family's native homeland.

Other Asian countries represented included Korea, Japan, China, and the Philippines. "There are many, many outstanding Asian talents right here in Valdosta," said Serena Huang, program and artistic director of the Valdosta Asian Cultural Association. "United by a spirit of caring and sharing, members of the various Asian communities have worked together to tell the story of a broader Asian culture than we have ever displayed before. Their knowledge is inspiring. Their commitment is so beautiful. And their dedication is most respectful." The Asian Cultural Experience Festival took more than a year to organize, she said. The plan is to make it an annual event for residents of Valdosta and the surrounding areas to enjoy.

For the middle school students, the festival took on a whole new meaning. As part of their social studies curriculum, these students spend nearly one-third of the school year studying Asia. Huang said the festival was created to enhance the academic curriculum. She said it supplements the images and illustrations portrayed in the textbooks. "This event really brings the information we learn in the classroom to life," said Shawna McDonald, 12, a seventh-grader at Hahira Middle School. "Seeing the people and talking to them helps us learn the information better, and that's always a good thing. It can be kind of boring just reading about something in a textbook."

Schoolmate Calvin Jones, 13, agreed with McDonald's assessment of the day's activities.

"It's interesting," he said. "The people of Asia are different from American people." Other schools that participated in the Asian Cultural Experience Festival were St. John Catholic School, Lowndes Middle School, Valdosta Middle School, J. L. Newbern Middle School and Southland Christian School.

"We strive to make the curriculum breathe and the mind expand," Huang said. "We are committed to bringing the most valuable cultural experiences to our students and to building a global perspective in our students here in Valdosta. We hope to prepare our students not only for international careers in the future but also for good citizenship."

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