

The Valdosta Daily Times

Folk Fair Fun

Rabyn Ratliff

March 04, 2007

— VALDOSTA - The Azalea International Folk Fair and Dance Competition welcomed guests to explore the many cultures of the world. Without ever leaving the Valdosta city limits, families ventured through several countries of the world Saturday while learning about the practices, traditions and cultures of various peoples. Looking over display boards which told stories of ancient architecture, politics and religion, climate and cuisine, attendees toured countries Mexico, the Czech Republic, Germany, and the many nations of Asia.

This year's event evolved from the vision of director Serena Huang, who began the celebration of the Chinese New Year in Valdosta in 2000. The event grew into a celebration of Asian culture just three years later, and continued to expand into an all-inclusive event of the world's cultures, many represented here in this area. "We've traveled to many other festivals, we wanted to go international some time ago, and we were taking baby steps, but with (Valdosta State University) students here and the growing international community through Moody, we decided to run on into it this year," said Randall Strother, assistant program director.

People gathered to enjoy the dance competition. While 20 teams of dancers performed to unique musical pieces, audience members smiled along, nodding or clapping to the same beat. "You can distinguish a Ukrainian dance by the various costumes, because each region has distinct embroidering, but most all the are high energy," said Roman Dykyj of the Ukrainian School of Dance in Saint Petersburg, Fla. "For many years, the government of the Soviet Union suppressed the Ukrainian people, through language, religion and dance, so any venue they found to express themselves, was always full of energy. In our group, nearly 75 percent were born in Ukraine and immigrated here, two percent have Ukrainian heritage, and about five percent just love the culture or love someone in it."

Since expanding from the Asian Cultural Festival, the event has continued its commitment to sharing culture with area youth, welcoming students to the conference center for educational field trips and puzzle challenges and the first Power Tech workshop. "Power Tech is a collaborative program we've secured with Taiwan, and no one in the U.S. can compete unless they come here to do it," said Strother. "Today, students

were able to pre-register for the September competition and make notebooks, and they'll be designing, building and testing mechanical robots. This entire festival is really bringing about networking through our community, state, nation, and now internationally."

Several community groups volunteered to help make this year's event a success, including students of the Lowndes High Culture In Action club. "I've been in CIA since my freshman year and I've participated with the Asian program since I was in fifth grade," said Ruth Davis, an LHS junior who helped sell international jewelry, games and gifts. "The club is really a neat approach to get kids to understand Asian and other cultures, especially with all the field trips. I love to travel, and being in this program really broadens your horizons, and with the American economy and communication heading toward the international market, it's very good to understand the other cultures of this world."

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Paul Leavy/The Valdosta Daily Times The Dewar Elementary Chinese Folk Dance team performs a lion folk dance during the International Folk Dance Competition at Azalea International Folk Fair & Dance Competition Saturday.