

Habla Español?



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GILROY – “Anaranjado ... blanco ... azul!” This may sound like your average high school freshman Spanish class, but actually, it’s a group of 14 local children, ages five through 12, at the Kids Into Speaking Spanish program at Brownell Academy.

“I like the color games,” said 9-year-old Kevin Spier. “Learning all the colors – blue is azul, gray is gris – and it has just been really fun with the teachers.”

Kids Into Speaking Spanish, or KISS, is a week-long camp offered by the city of Gilroy’s Department of Community Services designed to introduce children to the Latin culture.

Camp lasts from 8:30 a.m. to noon each day. It’s packed with games, art projects and activities led by counselors Ricardo Novoa and Susi Franco.

In the first few days, the kids are separated by age group and their knowledge of the Spanish language. Some of the children know very little and others have grown up in a Hispanic household and are familiar with the language.

On this particular day, the kids’ hands and faces are speckled with glitter, glue and paint as they create their own versions of feathered Aztec masks.

“We’re making Aztec masks to teach about the history of Mexico,” Franco said enthusiastically.

Next, the kids will paint pictures of the seasons with feathers – like the Aztecs would. The lesson combines what they’ve learned in the past two days, including colors, seasons and the Aztec culture.

The kids start by learning how to say numbers and colors in Spanish through rhyme and repetition. They quickly move on to singing songs to remember shapes and parts of the body. Later, Novoa leads them in games to practice their seasons and days of the week. At the end of the program, the children help prepare a traditional Mexican meal to discover Spanish food. The week wraps up with a bang - a party to celebrate their new skills and knowledge of the Spanish culture.

“It’s kind of hard to choose (my favorite activity), since we’ve done a lot of fun stuff, but, I’d say the color game probably (is my favorite).”



... paint to make masks, counselor Susi Franco has Rachele Caserza and Manny Walton smile as they work on their masks during the KISS culture camp at Brownell Academy.

8-year-old Shayna Robledo during their snack break. The color game is an educational version of tag.

“I love the kids, you have to love the kids. You have to have a passion for them,” said Novoa. His passion for the kids and for his job is obvious.

Originally from El Salvador, Novoa worked with children in summer camps in Quebec, Canada, for the past five years before coming to California to work with the KISS Program.

Director Chris Clark’s children were the inspiration behind KISS. His two children had both learned Spanish in their pre-school, but when they reached public elementary school, there were no Spanish programs offered. Clark decided to start his own program at his son’s elementary school.

“There are two ways that the KISS Program benefits the children,” explained Clark. “First, it educates them about the Latin culture and introduces them to a whole new world to discover and explore. It also prepares children for taking Spanish later in high school and college.”

For the past two years, Clark has expanded KISS into three different programs. The original program – based in elementary schools – is the National School Enrichment KISS Program. This branched off into a year-long pre-school program and the week-long Spanish camps during the summer. Gilroy’s KISS Program, run by Novoa and Franco spans