



Day of the Dead festival held at Harrison school

Saturday, November 06, 2010

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HARRISON TWP. Children with painted faces and costumes carried calacas ofrendas as students at the Friends School in Mullica Hill celebrated culture, language and art at their "Dia de los Muertos," or Day of the Dead festival Friday.

Children begin learning Spanish in pre-k at the Friends School, and the festival, which includes students in all grade levels, integrates their language and art classes to teach the history and importance of the Mexican holiday.

Dia de los Muertos is celebrated annually in Mexico, as well as a handful of other Latin American countries. It focuses on gathering friends and families to pray for and remember those that have died. It usually coincides with the Catholic holidays of All Souls' day and Saints' Day.

"It's a special holiday because we remember our ancestors, those that came before us," Spanish teacher Sophie Ragone said. "And we try to celebrate a holiday that is from a culture we are studying. Plus, it's so much fun."

On Friday afternoon, all of the students traveled to each other's classrooms to see the art work they have done in preparation for the day. Then, a parade was held through the school's grounds with a large paper mache "calaca," or skeleton, leading the formation of skull-painted faces.

Students at the school prepared three "ofrendas," or offering alters complete with food offerings, candles and art work. Each class also prepared a skit or presentation to perform that showcased their knowledge of Mexican culture along with the language they have been studying.

The fifth-graders performed the "danza di los viejitos," or the dance of the old people, in full costume while the third- and fourth-graders put on a "calaca" fashion show, with students dressed up as a character representing letters of the Spanish alphabet.

"Dia de los Muertos is a Mexican festival that we celebrate because we can integrate our art program and our language program," said Head of School Bruce Haines. "And it's away to remember those we've lost."

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