

Hola! Spanish language and culture learning made fun for kids

by Susan Trabucco

A wide and welcoming smile, expressive hands, a ready laugh, and eyes alight with enthusiasm aptly describe Portland Early Learning Project Director Jessica Amezcua. For parents looking for a positive and passionate force in their children's Spanish language and culture education, look no further than Jessica and her staff of six other teachers.

Portland Early Learning Project, often referred to as PELP, won the title of Best Language Camp in the 2017 NW Kids Magazine contest. In each of the two years prior to that, PELP earned a respectable runner-up position in the same contest, and in 2014 grabbed the top spot.

What's the secret to the program's success? Jessica attributes it to PELP's emphasis on eliciting a love of Spanish language and its varied cultures through play, sign language, music and singing, reading, games, and even taste bud-awakening tamarind candies plus snacks such as cucumbers, radishes, or apples—with a sprinkle of salt and chile (considered a treat in some Latin American cultures).

"In Portland, children rarely have the opportunity to be exposed to how kids in other parts of the world live, so we bring that world to our students," says Jessica.

PELP's cultural education component isn't limited to just one country, however. "There are many different cultures that speak Spanish, so our programming might include Guatemala one time, Mexico the next," she said.

A key benefit from Jessica's standpoint is that children who have a positive exposure to Spanish early on have a good base if they go on to take academic Spanish language coursework. "Children start to develop the facial muscles necessary to speak the language, so they are better equipped for the next step."

Wonder what Jessica's background is that brought her to leading this popular program? It includes living in Mexico on a college exchange program and achieving fluency by committing to speaking only Spanish while there. Additionally, after graduation, Jessica did a two-year stint in her field of study—biology—in Cuernavaca, Mexico, then married a Mexican man she met while working there, and later enrolled their children in a Montessori school in Tijuana. All of these experiences and more (too numerous to mention in the space available here) add up to plenty of credibility for Jessica in the language and culture that she loves to share with kids and adults.

Parents who drive by Bethany Lutheran Church at NE 37th & Skidmore might be familiar with the cheerful PELP sign that hangs out front. PELP is a year-round teaching program offered not only in the Beaumont-Wilshire neighborhood, but also in the West Hills, Beaverton, and beyond. Programming includes classes for children aged 18 months through the 3rd grade (and their parents!), as well as summer camps for kids ages four to nine. Class sizes are limited, and private classes are also available.



Portland Early Learning Project Director Jessica Amezcua is an enthusiastic leader and teacher of Spanish language and Latin American culture, conducted both in our neighborhood and in other areas. Here she displays one of many entertaining Spanish language books used to engage young students. Photo by Susan Trabucco

For more information about Portland Early Learning Project, a longtime advertiser in this publication, visit PortlandEarlyLearning.com.