

Monarch's relationship with Museum of Man features culture-on-culture learning

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Students from the Monarch School work on a project through a program with the San Diego Museum of Man.

The Monarch School in Little Italy occupies an unusual place in a city center full of everything but children. Its state-accredited testing is administered under a public-private partnership; its 151 students between ages 5 and 18 are largely homeless or at risk; and its popular Cabo Café, an eatery run mostly by the kids, had to close a couple years ago to make way for classroom space. In each case, Monarch is a bit of an enigma, a downtown fixture since 1988 whose adversities are no match for its feisty, colossal heart.

"It's a challenge. Never a boring day," agreed principal/CEO Sarita Fuentes on a recent morning, fresh off an effort to help reunite a family.

Even amid an innocuous event like that, the school community makes strides in overcoming its socioeconomic borders.

Meanwhile, a Monarch partnership with a Balboa Park staple is turning some of those youthful smiles into deliberate nods of comprehension.

Since late August, the park's Museum of Man, a nationally acclaimed archaeological and anthropological repository, has offered an after-school program for Monarch's grades 2 through 12, featuring an artifact presentation and discussion by educators, guest artists and scholars. Four sessions running in 10-week cycles include instruction in anthropology, archaeology and linguistics, and hands-on time in the museum's labs, with a greater grasp of the world's cultural fabric the goal.

The program will culminate with a student arts and science fair. The museum's education staff will administer the program under the direction of Cynthia Dillon Eischen, director of interpretation and education.

Show a La Jolla boy some pottery from the ruins of the Incan culture's Machu Picchu, and his face might brighten beneath

the cathedral-beamed roof over his head. Give the same piece to a kid fresh from a night's sleep on a rain-splattered sidewalk, and understandably, he'll pass. Fuentes knows the difference — for her, then, the program redoubles in its importance.

“We are always trying to educate our students, and ourselves, about not only the variety and the richness and the contributions of people from different cultures,” she said. “For our population...to be able to see and learn something about their culture in particular is beneficial for them. They need to have that exposure and they need to have that knowledge so they can be proud of their heritage and their culture.”

Nothing particularly new in that philosophy, until you consider that three distinct ethnicities figure into the kids' adverse home lives. White, black and Hispanic children make up the majority of Monarch's mix. The program addresses cultures through cultures, and the kids have that much more to share.

“The program helps our (multiethnic) population recognize the gains being made by their own different cultures and different people in the community,” Fuentes said. “We really want them to have that foundation.”

So does Alan Jaffe, a museum board member with a deep interest in cultural anthropology and kid welfare.

“I had the image that these kids sometimes needed a safe place,” Jaffe said. “Because of school (budget cuts), kids are let out now much earlier than they were, and no one was sure where the kids might go.”

From there, Jaffe approached Fuentes with the offer of a museum classroom space filled with Egyptian, Mayan, pre-Colombian and Southwest American artifacts — “bones, skulls, all the stuff kids love.

“We have the finest Egyptian collection west of the Mississippi,” Jaffe added. “We created this Egyptian area for the program, and the kids have a place where they can dress up in all that. They can put tiaras or robes on like ancient Egyptian princes and princesses or make little scarab magnets or burial replicas out of clay. And they learn a lot. They learn art. They learn the culture. They learn the paleontology. They learn healing ceremonies. They learn about sand paintings, a perfect replica of a balanced, harmonious world.

“Sarita said it the best,” Jaffe said. “She called what we're trying to give the kids a ‘level playing field.’ As the years go on, at least these kids have had some of the same cultural and social opportunities as suburban kids.”

A daunting task, especially given the fact that many Monarch boys and girls don't have refrigerators on which to place those little scarab magnets. And Monarch's unremarkable \$1.6 million annual budget doesn't allow for many according frills. The upshot, Fuentes said, may introduce a student's sense of unease in other environments.

“One of our donors paid for a homeless student to go to either Francis Parker or Bishop's. It didn't work,” Fuentes explained. “The student didn't want to continue because she didn't feel comfortable or normal. So there are definitely at-risk students in every school setting.”

But there's also a wealth of cultural understanding out there, designed to address whatever discomfort that girl experienced. The Monarch-museum partnership is a small step in that direction.

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