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## CULTURE CAMP

# Fun excursion to a whole new world

**Broward County children spend the summers 'visiting' Morocco, Australia, Brazil and Native North America without leaving the county.**

BY DARRAN SIMON

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At first they wondered what the wire hanger could possibly have to do with Brazil. But after wrapping newspaper around it, adding flour, water and paint, they saw the point: They were making snakes that live in the Amazon and other Brazilian forests.

"You didn't think you could make a snake out of a hanger," said Sharise Meighan, 13, as the black and blue paint on the snake they named Tony dried on a newspaper nearby.

"It challenged us in a way that schoolwork doesn't."

Using crafts, folktales, food and games, more than 340 students in an Urban League of Broward County summer camp spend three days a week for a month learning about the cultures of Brazil, Morocco, Australia and Native North America.

The lessons are part of the Culture Camp, the brainchild of Pompano Beach resident Judith Keiser, 44, a corporate attorney who now does contract work.

The students from Broward and Miami-Dade visit each region without leaving Plantation Middle School, where the camp is held. Bearing passports with their fingerprints and photographs, they travel to each classroom learning the region's language, customs, geography and foods.

During their journey, they carry a travel bag, which is a decorated paper bag filled with the crafts they made. There is the snake from the wire hanger and the Hand of Fatima, a good luck charm in Morocco named after the daughter of Mohammad.

"They are intrigued by it -- just to learn something new," said Delano Grant, 28, one of 17 Urban League staff members, teachers and others who serve as program counselors.

## FUN LEARNING

Keiser's idea is for the students to have fun while learning about cultures.

Where else could 100 sea grape leaves, 400 tennis balls, paper shopping bags and at least 14 containers of cream cheese be used to teach children about culture?

"It helps us become smart for next year," said Tré Jenkins, 12.

In one class, students twisted strings around their fingers playing the Cat's Cradle, a game played by the Inuit, Native Americans living in Alaska and northern Canada and in most every corner of the world. Counselors have brought some of their own ideas to the program.

Latisa Nelson, a fifth-grade teacher at Harbordale Elementary School, had her students make vests out of paper grocery shopping bags that they decorated with beads.

"Even if you can touch a little bit on everything, hopefully they will want to go back and later and do more research," Nelson said.

The culture camp started with a boy named William.

That's Keiser's son, who had a thirst for geography. In kindergarten at Pine Crest School in Fort Lauderdale, he helped fourth-graders study for a quiz. William, now 9, usually beat his parents at geography games naming countries starting with letters of the alphabet.

In 2002, Keiser wanted to set up a geography play date for her son and his friends. The plan was to go around the world in eight days. But Eileen Donohue, then director of education at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fort Lauderdale, persuaded Keiser to make it into a camp and suggested that Keiser hold it at the church.

Keiser later sat next to Germaine Smith-Baugh, senior vice president of programs for the Urban League, at a Children's Services Council of Broward County meeting.

The next day Smith-Baugh called Keiser. She liked Keiser's idea, and the Urban League wanted it for its summer enrichment program. Keiser had to write a curriculum in less than three months.

The Urban League has used the camp for three years.

"Our belief is that we have to make an attempt to expose youth in the community to cultures beyond where they live," said Paul Van Putten, the Urban League's director of youth enrichment. "What we would love to see is them gain a hunger to travel."

## **WIDENING HORIZONS**

For many students, who have never traveled farther than Georgia, it has done that and introduced them to cultures other than their own.

"Half of them would never think about Brazil," said Grant, a teenage pregnancy prevention program specialist at William Dandy Middle School in Fort Lauderdale.

Keiser formed The Culture Company in 2003 and Donohue became her marketing director.

Keiser licenses the curriculum and trains counselors. It is also used by the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta and Unitarian University Congregation of Gwinnett.

Touched by Sept. 11, she wanted to go beyond a familiarity of different cultures. She wanted children to learn about moral character, human value and how to avoid conflicts.

She adopted the motto "teaching peace thru play," for the company.

"Sept. 11 showed me that misunderstandings on a global scale produces violence," she said. "All violence is perpetrated by individuals ... I felt it was important to cultivate peace on an individual scale."

