

Lifestyle

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The Culture Camp program "is all about peace through play, teaching tolerance, teaching cooperation, exposing youngsters to other cultures and environments."

— CHRISTINE BATES,
URBAN LEAGUE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR



ON TOP OF DOWN UNDER: Tiffany Kelly, 8, listens to the day's lesson on the customs and culture of Australia at the Urban League's summer camp in Fort Lauderdale. The camp's cultural component is designed to teach kids appreciation of other cultures through music, games, stories and food. The background wall contains the children's hand cutouts along with flags of other nations. Staff photos/Susan Stecker

On top of the world

Culture Camp is a summer program that gives children a chance to learn about — and understand — people in other countries.



PASSPORT TO UNDERSTANDING: Children at Culture Camp receive passports that they fill with cultural information on different countries.

BY MARGO HARAKAS
STAFF WRITER

Didn't matter that Christine Bates was an ADULT. Didn't matter that she was a VIP, more important even than the Urban League's camp counselors. May in fact be why the waist-high straight talker singled her out.

Walked right up to her on the Pine Ridge Alternative Center campus in Fort Lauderdale, looked her in the eye, and in a voice he might have used to correct a younger sibling said, "Miss Bates, we're going to have to fix this."

"Well, what do you mean?" Bates responded, her interest aroused.

"I'm not supposed to learn during summer," said the boy, a camper in the Urban League's summer program.

Bates, youth development director for



LET'S MAKE A NOSE HERE: Damon Northern, 8, gets help from Culture Camp creator Judith Keiser during a lesson about Australia in which Urban League campers made models of koalas with dough.

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Program seeks to promote intercultural understanding

CAMP

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the Urban League of Broward County, tried to stifle a laugh. She talked about how learning is all around us, how deciphering the mysteries of the world can be fun, even in a summer camp, how knowledge is power, and . . . She finally just said, "We'll get this right for you next year."

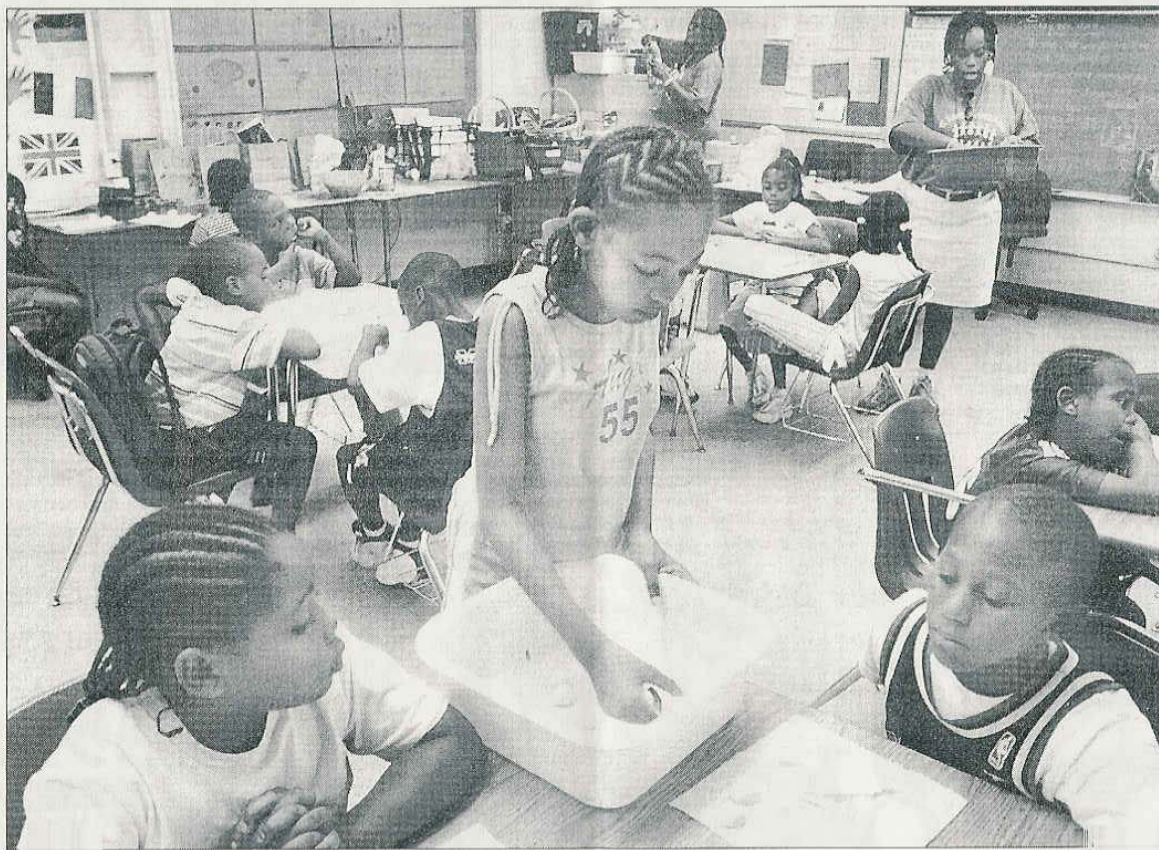
Couple of days later, the same boy spotted her and in a grunt of unmistakable approval indicated this culture thing wasn't so bad after all.

What he didn't know was that the inspiration for the cultural camp came from a 7-year-old boy named William, who's been obsessed with geography since he was 3. His mother, Judith Keiser, created the cultural camp curriculum.

William first learned the names of countries by doing puzzle maps at his Montessori school. He discovered still other lands, their locations and the sound and rhythm of their music from the Talking Globe his grandmother gave him. And from the age of 5, whenever on a car or boat trip, he'd ask to play the geography game.

"Let's start with the letter Z," he'd say, then quickly jump in with "Zaire."

Give him an A, and even he'd shoot back: Albania, Armenia, Andorra, Afghanistan, Austria, Australia, Azerba-



ERIALS: Maritza Valle, 11, hands out dough to fellow Urban League campers Juanita Scott, 6, and Nathaniel Dele, 6, as they make dough koalas for a lesson about Australia. Staff photo/Susan Stocker

She was strongly that unless dealing with hate

mom. Keiser found hope, and a

gram. Keiser taught the counselors

learn that while Yanks speak th

up at home.

A Coroboree festival wraps up the Australian sojourn. It's an occasion to break out the flutes and drums again, and for the children to paint their faces Aborigine style.

"We were looking for something that focuses on reading with hands-on type activities," says Bates. Keiser's program fit the bill on several fronts. "Judy's curriculum is all about peace through play, teaching tolerance, teaching cooperation, exposing youngsters to other cultures and environments. It comes at a time when we have so much going on in the world."

When Keiser's Culture Camp gets under way later this month, it will be a half-day program, followed by organized group outings with parents to cultural destinations such as museums, places of worship and ethnic restaurants. And each Friday, in keeping with the theme, the Unitarian Universalist Church will host a festival complete with appropriate food and entertainment.

Keiser would love to see her curriculum adopted by the public schools. She can see this, in fact, becoming her life's work.

"This is emotionally satisfying in a way law was not," she says. "I think I can do some good in my own small way. It's a small idea, but a large cause . . . helping to create a world worth living in."

It's been a long time since she's taught anything, she says. It's in the need for more cultural understanding in our world.

a geography test when he was in first grade.

Last fall, while thinking about how best to keep William occupied during the summer, an idea came to Keiser, an idea combining William's passion and Keiser's reaction to the tragedy of 9-11.

cultural understanding.

Only by "understanding that all people have the same needs and deserve to have those needs met can we grow past the current problems in the world," says Keiser, who three years ago gave up her law practice to become a stay-at-home

interested in it all, and he loves it all. To me, that's a great foundation for being tolerant and understanding."

Keiser began to collect children's stories from around the world. She researched games, dances, music, all sorts of fascinating information about the vibrant cultures on this small whirling planet. Boxes of collected materials began to pile up in her Fort Lauderdale home.

And meticulously, she began putting together a curriculum aimed at developing cultural literacy and building good character in a fun, playlike way. "William's been my editor. He's my focus group."

Needing a place to hold her camp, Keiser approached Eileen Donohoe at Fort Lauderdale Unitarian Universalist Church. Donohoe loved the idea. The women decided on one camp, running July 28 through Aug. 8, for 25 youngsters age 7 to 11.

Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Children's Services Council of Broward County, Keiser met Germaine Smith-Baugh, senior vice president of programs for the Urban League of Broward County, who expressed interest in incorporating the culture camp component into the League's own summer pro-

gram. Three days a week for eight weeks Urban League campers, toting passport and travel bag, "visit" another land. By experiencing the language, customs, music, games, literature, crafts, dress and cuisine, the youngsters come to realize, says Sonya Patterson-Ritter, summer enhancement program coordinator, "We're not separate people. We're all the same despite our separate backgrounds."

This particular week, the focus is Australia.

"Who travels on a walkabout?" Latavia Gardner, program specialist, asks her group of 7- and 8-year-olds.

"Aborigines," answer the campers.

"Where are Aborigines from?"

"Australia," they boom back. And then they draw a map of their own walkabouts, which they later tape to the wall. A walkabout, Keiser explains, is tracing the path of your ancestors over your piece of the Earth.

Earlier in the week, the travelers learned about indigenous animals of Australia, sang the kookaburra song, and played flutes and drums.

Now, this morning, they form mini koalas out of play dough and raisins, and they

large ranch, fair dinkum is an adjective for genuine and honest.

"I like how they speak different than us," says Christopher Wooten, 8, letting the word ngana roll off his tongue.

He tucks his word list into his travel bag, which also contains his passport, complete with photo, a map, and a list of Australian animals and how to identify them. His passport includes a journal in which he summarizes what he's learned about Australia.

Crammed into the travel bags also are items (represented by photos clipped from magazines) the youngsters think they need for their journey. Quanisha Harris, 8, has "packed," along with her toothbrush and toothpaste, hair coloring and a microwave oven. Others have lugged along televisions and video games.

"I like this camp a lot," says Ron Lubin, 7. "I like learning about the Aborigines. And I like the food they give us."

Before the summer has ended, these young explorers will have visited, among other places, India, Greece, Morocco, Ghana and Brazil. They'll leave India with a packet of spices (they mixed themselves) and a recipe their mother can cook

ariate. "Anything we can do to equip our children better for this complicated world they will inherit is worth any effort."

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THE IDEA GUY: William Keiser, whose interest in geography led his mother to create Culture Camp, does show and tell at school. Keiser family photo

