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Features

School district to continue 'intercultural' workshops

Trina Ortega



Roaring Fork High School teacher Sarah Everill talks about where her ancestors migrated from, during a Roaring Fork School District intercultural training, held March 5-7 in Carbondale. Counselors, teachers, administrators and community liaisons from middle and high schools attended the training and will now be able to lead the two-day workshop for students. (Trina Ortega photo)

To ensure that important intercultural education that has taken place among students does not fall by the wayside, the Roaring Fork School District (RFSD) recently provided training to staff who will be qualified to lead future workshops aimed at creating safe environments among the ethnically diverse school populations.

Sixteen staff members from the district and schools in Carbondale, Glenwood and Basalt attended a three-day training in Carbondale recently to gain the skills to lead workshops for middle- and high-school students.

Facilitated by De Palazzo of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the "train the trainer" session included community liaisons, administrators, counselors and teachers. Palazzo was impressed that district administrators have strongly supported the workshops and trainings.

"I really applaud the Roaring Fork School District's insight and forward-thinking to train a cadre of adults," said Palazzo, who had previously conducted student-level workshops at Roaring Fork, Basalt and Glenwood Springs high schools prior to the recent staff training that also included Bridges High School and the three middle schools.

"This work is sorely needed in all of our schools in the United States because the complexion is changing. ... It's celebrated, but diversity brings tension, conflict and fear. If we don't deal with the complexities [that come with] these students spending the next seven to eight years together, we're going to end up dealing with violence," Palazzo said.

The student workshops were organized by the Aspen-based Children's Health Foundation (CHF) and sponsored through funding from organizations including the Colorado Trust, the town of Carbondale, Aspen Thrift Shop and Aspen Rotary.

CHF emphasizes safety in schools and has provided other workshops throughout the Valley that teach schools how to develop tolerant environments. Another of its well-known programs is the Safe School Ambassadors, which provides tips on bully prevention.

Weather

Carbondale, CO

64 °F / 18 °C

Mostly Cloudy at 2:49 PM

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- Home / Front Page
News
Features
Opinions
Community
Letters
Sports
Obituaries

Other Papers

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Aspen Times Weekly
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Eagle Valley Enterprise
Grand Junction Free Press
La Tribuna Colorado
Leadville Chronicle
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Sky-Hi Daily News

“This whole intercultural thing is so important in this Valley because the Hispanic culture is growing so much,” said CHF Executive Director Mardell Burkholder, adding that conflict often stems from a lack of understanding. In the case of the intercultural trainings, the goal is to develop a respect for other cultures.

Palazzo echoed that sentiment and noted that in the Roaring Fork Valley, both the Latino and Anglo cultures have their own ways of valuing and celebrating connection, family, relationships and community.

“How do both of these identities — which are similar but different — live, work and play together? This is more of a rhetorical question that gets answered as we do our work together,” Palazzo said.

Sharon Moya, the districtwide instructional facilitator for English Language Learners, said she attended the Basalt High workshop last year and was moved by how effective it was for the students.

“I walked in just after a huge breakthrough” among the students, she said. “I went in and saw the power of that training and thought to myself, ‘Why don’t we make this systemic?’”

Since then, it had been a dream of hers to continue providing this type of education in the school district, which is about 48 percent non-Anglo, according to Moya.

“We really want to make a difference; not that things are so bad. It’s just that they can be better,” Moya said.

The training included ideas and plans about how each school and the district can implement additional student workshops to pass on what they’ve learned.

Alejandra Rico, a community liaison at Glenwood Springs High School, plans to share what she has learned at an overnight “lock-in” with students in April, and she’ll take both Latino and Anglo students to the La Raza Latino youth conference in Denver this spring.

In February 2006, Rico and 30 Glenwood High students participated in an intercultural understanding workshop. Afterward, they held a lock-in during which the students (half Anglo, half Latino) had a sleep-over, cooked meals together, watched the movie “Crash” about racial stereotypes, and just hung out.

“It turned out really fun and beautiful,” Rico said.

Additionally, as a result of the intercultural trainings, the school formed the Multicultural Club this school year that Rico said is “very participatory.”