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Student Cultural Exchange program celebrates 40th anniversary with another Loreto trip

by Eric Michael Stitt
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The Hermosa Beach Sister City Association is celebrating the 40th anniversary of its Student Cultural Exchange program. The group recently returned from Loreto where 21 beach cities students learned about life in the Mexican city. A students learn how to make traditional Mexican food. (photo courtesy of George Barks)

Dropping roughly 1,000 miles below the Mexican border is the quiet town of Loreto that rests on the eastern shoreline of Baja California. The image of a seaside community with outdoor activities under the sun and warm temperatures is where the similarities end compared to

Hermosa Beach. Yet the benefits of a four-decade relationship between the two towns are endless.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Student Cultural Exchange program that was created from the Hermosa Beach Sister City Association, which is celebrating 47 years. And to commemorate that, more than 20 middle-school students and five chaperones recently returned after a week in Loreto to experience the vastly different culture, proving that the program is stronger than ever.

The Student Cultural Exchange Program became an addition to the HBSCA after the late Joe Diaz pushed for including it because “he wanted the youth of Hermosa Beach to experience life in another country with someone the same age,” said HBSCA Student Cultural Exchange President Deborah Wright DeMaderios. She said with their setup, by having students live with a family and a “brother/sister” for a week, they get to see firsthand what life is like on a daily basis in another country where the norm is drastically different than at home.

For more than three decades the program held strong and steadily improved. But a few years ago, it almost evaporated due to a lack of participation, mostly stemming from parents who questioned the level of safety in Mexico and were therefore apprehensive about sending their children. While numbers dwindled, a waiting list of Loreto children wanting to participate continued to grow. But since the program pairs up students from each city, only a few were able to discover what life was like in Hermosa Beach, threatening the SCE's existence.

So SCE Director George Barks, who is also the vice president of the HBSCA, pushed for the concept of branching out to Redondo Beach and Manhattan Beach to create a tri-city Student Cultural Exchange program.

“I feel like if we didn’t reach out, it would (disappear),” said Barks, who is a Redondo Beach resident and former Hermosa Beach City Councilman.

The program quickly went from bottoming out at five students to now having 21 children on this last trip.

Barks said on the trips, the type of education they’re getting is not one that can be found in a classroom, by reading books or online. It’s the kind that is only obtained by immersing oneself into another culture, opening up an entirely new world.

"It makes the kids appreciate a lot more what we have here," Barks said. "In Loreto, they don't have the material things like we have. I think they're coming home and appreciating what we have ... (they're) learning families can be happy without having as much as we do here (and that we) shouldn't look down at people who have less monetary things than us."

DeMaderios, a Hermosa Beach resident, said SCE allows children to appreciate and embrace the unfamiliar differences.

Barks said because the student exchange program is open to seventh and eighth grade students, the trips can entice them to seek out other student exchange experiences at the high school level. It provides a head start for children who want to be "ambassadors," Barks said, adding that concept stems from the People-to-People Program established by President Dwight Eisenhower to encourage cultural understanding and bring peace.

The 40-year-old program also creates friendships, which was DeMaderios' favorite part of the last trip.

"What I enjoyed the most was seeing how much the students enjoyed themselves, both beach cities and Loreto students, and how well our students integrated with their Loreto families and new Loreto friends," she said. "Witnessing the connection between two different cultures and seeing friendships blossom ... is something that will remain with them for the rest of their lives."

Beach cities students will get the chance to host their friends from Loreto July 25 to Aug. 1, returning the favor and showcasing the vastly different lifestyle north of the border. Barks said it's an opportunity for residents to also educate themselves on the benefits of learning about another culture as the SCE program is now stronger than ever.

"I hope locals can see the real benefits of learning how people live in other countries and how that contributes to the growth of their kids and make them aware of the other parts of the world," Barks said.