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Sister City student exchange officially becomes tri-city program

by Eric Michael Stitt

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The Hermosa Beach Sister City Association has officially made its student exchange program a tri-city one. This will formally allow middle-school students in Redondo Beach and Manhattan Beach to join students from Hermosa Beach on annual trips to Loreto, Mexico. See cover story for details.

(photo courtesy of George Barks)

In a move to benefit children who are less fortunate and to save a treasured, yet shrinking student exchange program, middle-schoolers from all the beach cities are formally being welcomed to participate in an organization that helps educate local children about other cultures.

For several years, Hermosa Beach's Sister City Association was experiencing dwindling numbers in its student exchange program, which pulled in children from Hermosa Valley School. In an effort to save the nearly 40-year-old program, Vice President George Barks decided to welcome seventh and eighth grade students from Manhattan Beach and Redondo Beach, too, on a trial basis. Now after three years of opening the program up to students outside of Hermosa Beach, the HBSCA has officially made it a tri-city program.

The student exchange portion of the 45-year-old HBSCA has been swapping students from Loreto, Mexico, since 1974. But in the last decade, it had experienced a serious drop in participants from averaging more than 10 to falling as low as five students per year for five consecutive years. Barks felt the downward economy and increased crime in Mexico were the main factors for the decline, but knew something had to change. So in 2009, Barks reached out to families in the other beach cities to see if their involvement could revive a once-strong program. And it didn't take long to realize his experiment was working, as he's been able to boost the participation level up to 15 students per year ever since.

Barks got the idea to expand the program to neighboring students after a waiting list in Loreto started filling up, keeping students from being able to join. Parents in Loreto had expressed concern to Barks about the limited number of students traveling to Mexico and eventually hosting their children, which led to the discussion of possibly adding more students from outside of the Hermosa Beach School District.

Despite breaking the tradition of it being a Hermosa Beach only program, Barks figured there were plenty of reasons to give it a shot. First, he figured it was the only way to keep the student exchange program running. Second, he felt it was the proper thing to do so children waiting to join in Loreto could experience what life is like in the beach cities. And finally, Barks said because this is for middle-school students, their involvement at an early age could help improve the student exchange programs at Mira Costa and Redondo Union high schools.

"We want to expose it to more students here and certainly more students in Loreto, Mexico," Barks said. "In my view, to have a viable program you need a minimum of 15 to 20 students. By having that many students, it exposes the program to more people and enriches the lives of students."

With participation numbers back to where they originally were before the merge, Barks is confident they'll average nearly 20 students per year. This year, the beach cities students take off for Loreto April 3 and return seven days later. And the Loreto students stay here for a week in July. The HBSCA subsidizes the Loreto students' plane tickets by paying them \$100 each. While the cost for beach cities' students will be \$445 for a plane ticket and about \$50 for spending money. Barks is telling parents to estimate spending about \$200 when they host their Loreto student. And for parents concerned about safety levels in that region, Barks said they have an article on their website about the U.S. State Department recognizing that southern Baja California is safer than the rest of Mexico.

Manhattan Beach resident Dave Gamble is one parent whose family has benefited from the HBSCA's expansion. His son jumped at the opportunity to experience a student exchange program at such an early age, and Gamble volunteered to be a chaperone to join his son last spring.

Gamble said while his mother was in high school, she participated in a student exchange program with a family in Brazil and their families are still close friends as the Gambles plan to visit them during the next Summer Olympics. Gamble said he wanted to create a similar relationship for his son to cherish as he grows older.

"People around the world have different cultures and until you go live with a family in a different country, that's when you understand a different culture," Gamble said. "This is something you shouldn't overlook."

Gamble said he'll never forget watching his son interact with the family in Loreto. He was speaking Spanish the entire time and learned so many valuable things about life outside of the United States, giving him a new perspective on how fortunate locals students are, he said. And that was all solidified when they hosted their student later in the summer.

Gamble said his family's experience is the perfect example for how the HBSCA can benefit students who don't live in Hermosa Beach and want to partake in such a program before high school since there are no other options for that age group. He agreed with Bark's theory about how this revamped tri-city program will strengthen ones at the high school level, too. He also said this provides beach cities students the opportunity to develop relationships with each other earlier since some of them will be attending the same high school.

Barks has been busy getting the word out about the official expansion into Redondo Beach and Manhattan Beach, speaking at middle school Spanish classes, posting information on websites and sending out fliers to parents. He said the deadline for students to apply for the non-school sponsored program is Dec. 10, and encourages all families to consider the benefits to not only students in Loreto and the HBSCA but also to their children.

“I think it’s very important for our students to learn another culture and how people live in that culture,” Barks said. “It exposes them early on how to be a citizen diplomat and creates a lifetime of memories.”

For more information, visit www.hb-sistercity.org.