

BY KAREN HAMMERDORFER  
DELANCEY  
CORRESPONDENT

POINT PLEASANT — When you meet someone new, you learn something new.

That was the message delivered to students during a cultural education program at Nellie Bennett Elementary School.

Michele Rodriguez and Tizzie Cregan of Blossom International spent two days visiting promoting the program to second grade students. Blossom International is nonprofit group based in Manasquan that promotes empathy for different cultures.

Rodriguez, of Manasquan, is executive director of the group. Cregan, of Brielle, is program director.

They urged the students that meeting someone different is an opportunity that should not only be embraced, but explored. In doing so, they said, one could help make the world a better place.

The women started the program by reading a story ("Mud Soup" by Judith Head) to the class.

The story is about a boy named Josh, who likes to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. A classmate, Rosa enjoys a black-bean soup that resembles mud. Rosa explains that her abuela, or grandmother, from Mexico makes the special soup. After much trepidation, Josh finally tastes the soup and learns that trying something different can be fun.

Rodriguez and Cregan then led students in a lively discussion detailing how foods, dress, language, holidays and traditions each play a role in defining one's culture.

"What is culture? Are all families the same?" asked Cregan. "We celebrate Thanksgiving in America but they don't celebrate it in England. And not everyone celebrates Christmas. Some celebrate Hanukkah."

The duo explained that if the children sat down and talked to someone who is different than they are, they might become friends.

Cregan told the class that there are some places of the world where girls don't go to school.

"That's not a good thing. It's not that they're just not taught to read, it's that they're not allowed," said Cregan.

"That's horrible!" declared second-grade student Emily Testa.

"What do you think would happen if every kid in the world found out that all cultures are OK? What do you think would happen when you grow up?" said Cregan.

"Wars will stop," said second-grade student Devin Moeller, who is Vietnamese.

"And there would be no more hate. That would be awesome!" said Cregan.

Second-grade student John Sullivan said the program taught him that "it's good to meet other people and not think they're weird."

Second-grade teacher Kathleen Gronert said she wanted her students to walk away from the program with an acceptance of others.

Gronert explained that before Christmas, the second grade classes held a "Christmas Around the World" program, in which families brought in ethnic foods as a way to celebrate each student's diversity.

Principal Linda Rocco said that each of the six second-grade classes were introduced to the program.

"It's free, it's local and it has a positive message," she said. "Young children are very accepting. Hopefully, they'll remember this lesson as they get older.

"In addition to accepting people from different cultures, we also want them to be more tolerant of people who have disabilities or come from a different socio-economic background," Rocco added.

Students also made an art project using different types of beans, glue and paper plates. They also received a "certificate of completion" and a copy of the book to take home.

Blossom International is run on a volunteer basis. Its various projects are funded by Manasquan-based businesses and grants from companies such as Wal-Mart in Brick and Neptune and Best Buy.

For information about the free "Cultural Education 4 Kids" program, visit <http://www.blossominternational.org/>.

Copyright © 2007 Ocean County Observer. All rights reserved.

Use of this site signifies your agreement to the [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). (Updated June 7, 2005) Site design by [Asbury Park Press](#) / [Contact us](#)