

World-wide cuisine, music highlight Marie Murphy event

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It was like a meeting of the United Nations, a gathering of representatives from the four corners of the world.

Only this time, it was in Wilmette at Marie Murphy School, where individuals representing more than 28 countries gathered on Nov. 3 for the fourth annual Intercultural Dinner and Talent Show.

The community-building event, organized by Marie Murphy and Avoca School (District 37) parent volunteers, first featured a buffet of family-prepared meals from various countries and cultures and served family style.

It was a sold-out evening with more than 420 people attending. There was no limit to the varieties of food available whether for main courses, side dishes or desserts.

The array of cuisines represented Argentina, Armenia, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Canada, China, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, India, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Netherlands, Pakistan, Philippines, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

"Parents bought and prepared their own food for the occasion while two local restaurants donated some dishes — Wilmette's Ao Sushi and Torino Ramen," said Lourdes Cornelius, one of the co-chairpersons of the event.

There was Iranian loobia polo, Armenian lula kebabs, Japanese sushi, Philippine pancit, German bratwurst, Greece's lemon chicken, Pakistan red bean



Violin players (left to right) Alex Kiley and Brayden Wu, fourth-graders at Avoca West, perform Nov. 3 at the annual Intercultural Dinner and Talent Show at Marie Murphy.

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rice cake, Chinese beef dumplings and so much more. Some of the parent cooks made complete dinners. Each item listed its ingredients on a card so there would not be a problem of allergic reactions to food.

"It would be hard for anyone who attended the dinner to go home hungry," said Miyako (Mia) Hasegawa, another co-chairperson.

Cornelius and Hasegawa were two of the five founding members of the Intercultural Dinner and Talent Show, which first began in 2014. Sarika Jathar, of Glenview, Mary Patel, of Wilmette and Colleen Rosenthal, of Winnetka, were the other three.

Natalie Anthony and Ami Das, of Glenview, and Tina Zhuo and Mireill Pare, of Wilmette, joined the event's organizing group last year.

"Our parent volunteers wanted to celebrate and take advantage of one District 37's biggest assets — its unique diverse school population. In so doing, families learned about each

other and the many cultures represented in the four communities from which Marie Murphy and Avoca draw their students — Wilmette, Winnetka, Glenview and Northfield," said Kevin Jauch, superintendent of Avoca School District 37. "There are about 40 different languages spoken among the 750 students in our schools. We have four full-time English learning teachers as a result. There is so much to learn from each other."

Jauch added many of the students are first generation Americans whose parents might be hesitant to seek out others in their community because of fears of not being accepted. The Intercultural Dinner and Talent Show was yet another way to show them they are very much welcome here.

"We asked parents to dress in their native costumes for the event if they wished," Hasegawa said. "It added to the festivity. Some parents might be hesitant to wear their traditional dress outside of their

homes. This gave them an opportunity to show others an example of their native clothing and answer questions about customs. Even some of the children came dressed in cultural outfits."

"What was so poignant about the evening is that everyone talked with each other even if their native countries were still at odds with each other," Cornelius said. "Food brought everyone together."

A talent show followed with acts by both students and parents. It did not represent any particular country or culture.

Acts featured guitar, piano, violin and viola music and dancing and magic tricks.

Performances included ones from countries of origin. One was a string quartet that played Chinese folk music. Another gave a karate demonstration.

"Many of the performers were students," Jauch said. "Eighty-nine percent of our student body participates in after school activities. Fifty



Izza Virani, a sixth-grader at Marie Murphy, plays the guitar.



Slena Hackl, a second-grader at Avoca West, puts on a karate demonstration.

percent of them play string instruments in nationally recognized programs. That is not to overlook the choir programs for students from all grade levels."

Parents applauded the Intercultural Dinner along with the diversity at the District 37 schools.

"There are so many people who come from different cultures, some of whom do not attend regular school events because of language barriers or they feel awkward," Mary Patel said. "This setting brings people together. They can leave their feeling of awkwardness at the door."

"I not only like the science and math education, my children are getting at Marie Murphy and Avoca, but they are learning about the world through the di-

versity of the community they live in," said Mila Shores, of Glenview.

"The parents and school staff have poured their hearts into this event," Reza Ekhtera said. "Look at how much good it is doing. People from all different cultures are talking and sharing with each other. This school is more like a private school than a public school."

"I think the success of this Intercultural Dinner is a testament to the students and their families who despite coming from four different communities work together," said Rick Zelinsky, president of the Avoca District 37 School Board. "We are lucky to have been afforded the luxury of such diversity in our neighborhoods."