

Snowmobiling for the Whole Family **Page 16** Photo Tips From the Pros **Page 20**
Parents Night Out Is Parents Night In **Page 4** Winter Break in the Upper Valley **Page 8**

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Learning a
**NEW
LANGUAGE**

Page 13





Carmen Rental, of Grantham, teaches children and their parents how to greet each other in Spanish during a recent Spanish enrichment program at Etna Library. Foreign language programs are on the rise at local libraries and schools as parents seek to prepare their children for a polyglot future.

VALLEY NEWS — SARAH PRIESTAP

When English Isn't Enough

By EMILY HEDGES

For the Valley News

Carmen Lezama Rental wants the preschoolers around her to envision the colors of a Latin American carnival.

She teaches them that in Spanish *azul* means blue, *rojo* means red and *verde* means green. She reads the children a story that brings to life the festival's traditional music, glittering parades and lively dancing. Then the kids construct traditional carnival masks and practice using the new words they've just learned.

Each month Rental, of Grantham, presents a different theme during her Spanish cultural enrichment program held on Saturday mornings at Etna Library. Fluent in Spanish, Rental works both as an interpreter for the Lebanon schools and as a private language tutor. Where kids are concerned, Rental's goal is to inspire them to learn a foreign language, and she believes the younger children start, the better.

"When they are young, they learn the language really fast and without an accent. It's like a mother tongue," said Rental, "When they get older, they are comparing it to English."

West Lebanon resident Sergi Elizalde agrees. Originally from Spain, Elizalde wants his 4-year-old son, Guillem, to speak both Spanish and Catalan, the languages spoken in Barcelona. That's why his family regularly attends Rental's Spanish program.

"(Guillem's) grandparents live in Spain, so when we visit, it's good

that he can communicate with them," said Elizalde. "I want him to know my two native languages and for him to have an interest in languages. I want him to understand that not everyone speaks English."

FROM RUSSIAN TO HEBREW

Libraries throughout the Upper Valley offer programs similar to the one in Etna. In South Royalton, library director Greg Tishner said he hopes children will learn something of the Russian language through a monthly event hosted by Yuliva Ballou. It began last April when five local libraries — South Royalton, Chelsea, Tunbridge, Sharon and Strafford — presented International Children's Book Week commemorating the birthday of Hans Christian Andersen. Ballou, a resident of South Royalton and a native of Russia, presented a bilingual story hour that was so well received Tishner asked Ballou if she would continue on a monthly basis.

"She reads fairy tales in Russian, then translates them into English. She shows pictures, passes out handouts that have words written in the Cyrillic alphabet, gives the pronunciation and translation and leads an activity," said Tishner.

In Hanover, parents can avail themselves of an array of foreign language opportunities, from French and Spanish play groups at Howe Library to lessons in Hebrew at the Upper Valley Jewish Community Center. For families who wish to expand their children's exposure to other languages and cultures, Dartmouth College invites them to

SEE WHEN — Page 14

Mi Montas, 2, of Lebanon, reaches for plastic gems while working on a carnival mask at a recent Spanish enrichment program at Etna Library. The monthly program, offered by Grantham resident Carmen Rental, introduces children to both the language and culture of Latin America.

VALLEY NEWS — SARAH PRIESTAP



When English Isn't Enough

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

participate in the Friendship Family Program, which pairs international students with host families. Students and families get to know one another through visits, outings, events and special occasions.

Hanover resident Mimi Lichtenstein has welcomed a number of students from the program into her home and feels it is a great way to enhance her children's foreign language education and give them confidence to travel the world.

"Exposing them to other cultures where they can meet people is so important," said Lichtenstein. "I want to give them that gift — the confidence to travel. It's a valuable feeling."

When her children were younger, Lichtenstein took them to Rental's program in Etna. Now that her three children are older — Allison is 12, Jessica is 10, Trevor is 7 — she looks for any opportunity to further their Spanish education.

Recently, Lichtenstein set her oldest daughter up with an Ecuadorian Spanish tutor via Skype. This summer, she plans to take the family to Spain, where she has signed her children up for a summer camp where no English will be spoken.

She points out, however, that parents don't have to travel the world to promote foreign language development at home. They can do simple things around the house, she said, such as changing the television language setting on cartoons to Spanish, purchasing children's books in Spanish, or installing foreign language apps on their telephones and letting the kids play with them. Lichtenstein uses Duolingo, a free language instruction app that Apple just named its 2013 free iPhone app of the year.

"Learning a foreign language is important to me. I love to travel and take my kids," she said. "I speak Spanish at an intermediate level. My kids enjoy watching me communicate with people. I'm a believer that it's great for kids all the way around."

Because of her passion for the subject, Lichtenstein volunteered to serve on a committee looking for ways to enhance the Hanover School District's elementary foreign language curriculum.

"Where we were as a community five years ago is not where we are today. The community desires to have a better program. Everyone sees the value. It's an important skill to have when they go to college, travel abroad and get a job," she said.

FOREIGN LANGUAGES GO ELEMENTARY

Woodstock Elementary School recently hired Renee Manheimer to provide regular Spanish instruction to its 183 students. Students now receive Spanish instruction twice a week: 40 minutes per class for second through sixth grade and 20 minutes for kindergarten through first grade.

One of the challenges, though, is finding an up-to-date curriculum on which to build a strong program.

"At the elementary level, we have to create our own curriculum," said Manheimer. "There isn't one available that is suitable for these technology-age kids. We combine technology, reading, conversation and games."

One thing Manheimer doesn't worry about is teaching grammar to younger students. "Every native speaker learns by listening and repeating through natural conversation," she said. "I believe the earlier the language is introduced, the better it is for them to obtain native-like speaking and writing. It's different when a student starts late middle school or high school."

At the Lyme elementary school, students in grades K-4 study Spanish; students in grades 5-7 study French; and the eighth-graders choose one or the other.

Principal Jeffrey Valence said he believes in the science behind introducing language to children while they are young.

"Our focus is to encourage development of the neurological pathways, those which optimize students' ability to acquire multiple languages. Our program provides the opportunity and experience to transition from one language to another by focusing instruction in one language in the first five years, kindergarten through fourth grade, and then introducing a different language in the fifth grade," he said.

A number of elementary schools in the Upper Valley are also enhancing their foreign language offerings. Marion Cross Elementary recently began offering French as early as third grade and plans to offer Spanish starting in kindergarten by 2015. The Pomfret School offers Spanish instruction to all students one day a week.

The Lebanon school system created a World Language Committee to investigate what it would take to start foreign language instruction at the elementary level. Christine Downing, director of curriculum, instruction and assessment for the Lebanon School District, said she believes foreign language instruction is essential in helping students compete in today's society.

"You hear a lot about digital literacy these days, but we have to remember that we are increasingly a global society, and that our children have to be prepared for that, too," said Downing.

For many parents, helping their children prepare for the future begins with something as simple as learning Spanish colors at Etna Library.

"We are not in a big city and do not have many of the traditional options for learning a second language," said Lichtenstein, "but if a parent is interested, there are resources out there."

Editor's Note: For more information on the Spanish enrichment program with Carmen Rental and programs with Howe Library, visit www.thehowe.org. For information on story time with Yuliva Ballou, call 802-763-7094. To learn more about hosting an international student through Dartmouth's Friendship Family Program, call 603-646-0987.