

'Cultures are not meant to be gate-kept': Students explore with Davenport, Bettendorf Diversity Clubs

Olivia Allen, Apr 17, 2024



Students in Davenport school's Cultural Diversity Club visit the Vietnam Buddhist Center in Houston, Texas over the 2024 spring break.

Students in Davenport schools' Cultural Diversity Club learn to celebrate their differences — and their similarities.

"We help kids learn about their culture and learn about other people's cultures," said Ayola Vesey, the club's district-wide facilitator.

Each month, the club celebrates a different culture in various ways, including field trips, guest speakers and organizing school-wide activities, presentations and other cultural promotions like playing themed music over the intercom on Fridays.

At Central, for example, French culture is April's focus.

Over spring break, Davenport students went on a district-wide Diversity Club trip to Houston, Texas — visiting several museums, places of worship and

other cultural hubs and touring Prairie View A&M University, a top-ranked Historically Black University.



Students in Davenport school's Cultural Diversity Club visit Prairie View A&M University during their 2024 spring break trip to Houston, Texas.

Vesey said the Diversity Club also partners with community groups and other Central extra-curriculars regularly.

"I'm a math teacher ... so I make sure we get (students) an expert on 'that' culture to learn from," she said of the club's monthly routine. "Either we go there or they come to us."

Locally, Central's club has visited the nearby German American Heritage Center and John Hauberg Museum of Native American Life in Rock Island. In February, they also toured the Stanley Museum of Art and the Student Cultural Houses at the University of Iowa.

Bettendorf High School also started a Cultural Diversity Club this school year, which faculty advisor Anna Roeder said evolved from another club, "Black Voices Matter."

"Students wanted the club to be more inclusive and (address) broader topics that matter to them," Roeder, a health sciences teacher, said. "We explore cultures represented in our community and in the country at-large in a respectful manner, help students grow as global citizens and give them a network of students (interested) in these goals across the Iowa Quad-Cities."

Bettendorf and Davenport schools' clubs typically both meet once or twice each month, with additional time sprinkled throughout student and teachers' free periods.

For its debut year, Bettendorf's Diversity Club has decorated sugar skull cookies for Hispanic Heritage Month and visited the Hauberg Museum in Rock Island, followed by an Indigenous-inspired meal at NEST Café.

Bettendorf students also joined in on the Davenport clubs' trips to the University of Iowa and German American Heritage Museum.

"We also hosted essay and student art contests to celebrate Black History Month. Students are also in charge of table top information for each culture theme month and a Friday Fact for schoolwide announcements," Roeder said. "In May, we'll (celebrate) Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Month, with a student-directed enrichment exploring art, music and dance."

More than a club

For two Central students, senior Nhi Nguyen and junior Benie Toko, the Diversity Club has given far more to them than most extra-curriculars would.

Both immigrated to the United States in 2011 and said the club had a large impact on their high school experience.

"Being from overseas, it felt hard to get accepted initially, and it still feels like I'm not (accepted) in some spaces," said Toko, whose family is originally from Togo, West Africa. "Being in this club helps me — and others — feel included and feel like ... (we) still belong to a community. I've learned a lot about myself, also."

Coming to the U.S. from Cà`n Thơ, Vietnam as a child, Nguyen said she felt she "couldn't speak" before the Diversity Club — not with confidence, at least.

Now, she's a student board representative for Central, speaking at monthly Davenport school board meetings.

"Ever since then, I've loved talking," Nguyen said of joining the club her freshman year. "Especially talking about cultural (topics), because not everybody knows about different cultures and those aspects of other people's lives. I think that's one of the most amazing things about people's identities."

Aside from making her more outgoing, the club also sparked a love of learning.



Students in Davenport school's Cultural Diversity Club visit the Holocaust Museum in Houston, Texas over the 2024 spring break.

"I want to know everything about everyone," Nguyen said. "Our community is very diverse, and every person brings something different to the table."

Toko agreed, adding there's plenty to celebrate when it comes to learning about her and peers' cultures.

"We are all people," she said. "Cultures are not meant to be gate-kept ... but for other people to learn about, enjoy, celebrate and to create a better community."

If she had to choose one highlight from the year, Toko said celebrating Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI) culture — especially, the Vietnamese spring holiday, Tết Nguyên Đán.

One of Nguyen's most memorable club experiences was touring the National Museum of the American Latino in Washington, D.C. in 2022.

Vesey, now a math teacher at Central High School, started the Diversity Club at West High School in 2018 through her local nonprofit, Inspire Next.

North and Central High Schools launched their own clubs soon after, joined by Mid City, Davenport's alternative high school, this school year.

Highlights from Houston

With the help of several Google searches, Vesey said the Houston trip was largely student-funded and directed.

"We literally Googled what cultural stuff was in Houston," she said with a laugh. "It's easier, I feel, when the kids (are invested) in coming up with the plan, rather than me giving them a plan."

Students sold chocolates to fundraise, while Vesey and other faculty leaders sought local sponsorships, which now include 100 Black Men, the Jewish Federation of the Quad Cities; Pete the Purple Bull; QC Morning Optimist Club; Rock Island Elks Lodge 1648, Quad Cities United and Regional Development Authority.

"I can tell it's a big load off students' shoulders," Vesey said of grant funds and sponsorships.



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Additionally, the Iowa State Education Association gave a \$500 Community Outreach Grant to the Davenport Education Association union this year to help support both Davenport and Bettendorf schools' Diversity Clubs.

Nguyen said fundraising was another, albeit surprising, highlight from her time in the club.

"We worked our butts off that summer (fundraising), and I'm always going to remember it as one of the best times of my life, because I felt so connected to everyone," she said, also giving kudos to Diversity Club faculty. "They were here on their own time, trying to (raise) enough money to go to Houston."

Whether they bought chocolates, Nguyen said community members' willingness to donate toward the Diversity Club also stood out.

"I was blown away by the kindness of others. I always smile, thinking back on it," she said, with a smile. "It was really fun, and I've made a lot of lifelong friends just through (fundraising)."



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Nguyen and Toko said the Vietnam Buddhist Center, Holocaust Museum and Hermann Park Japanese Garden were their favorite stops in Houston.

"It's really good to get out of your community and see things that are bigger or smaller (...) than what you usually experience every single day," Toko said. "There's so much more (in the world), and I think that was my biggest takeaway from Houston."

Nguyen has applied this mindset to her post-secondary journey — after graduation, she plans to enter the Texas National Guard.

"It made me realize not to be afraid to go somewhere and try something new," she said. "It made me more excited to (graduate) on a high point ... and more comfortable to be in Texas."

Moving forward

Roeder hopes Bettendorf's new Diversity Club helps the community "come together to learn about each other in a respectful way."

"We want all students and staff to feel (welcomed/accepted) at BHS and know that learning and acceptance is not just a classroom activity, but a lifelong one," she said. "We hope that our students leave well on their way to being successful, empathetic global citizens who will carry this 'interconnection of communities' into their future."

To Vesey, Diversity Club is the "heart" of a "head, heart, hand" approach Inspire Next follows. The nonprofit also offers a Smart Start tutoring program and runs the Carpenter's House mentorship program.

Toko and Nguyen think the club also benefits peers.

"This club (makes) others try their best and willing to do stuff that's out of their personality," the latter said. "I just love this club, and I'm going to miss (it)."

Both urge others — regardless of their cultural depth or identity — to join Diversity Club.

"If you want to learn about a different part of you and be more happy and aware with yourself, definitely check out the Cultural Diversity Club," Toko said.

Vesey said the next big, district-wide Diversity Club trip is slated for Germany in three years.

"We have some work to do; I've already got the cost figured out," she added. "We have a lot of chocolate to sell."