

School gives kids gift of second language

BY HEATHER RAY KARAM

The sounds of children laughing and singing echo from a Northeast Side classroom. One can hear the children repeating in unison the Spanish words "mono," "cebra" and "elefante."

For these preschoolers at Aragón Spanish Academy, they're doing more than just reciting the Spanish names for animals that live at the zoo. They are learning to speak the Spanish language.

The school is a private Spanish immersion program that focuses on teaching preschool-aged children Spanish in a classroom setting.

Rick Gonzales and his wife, Rosa Linda, opened the school in January to introduce parents and their young children to Spanish.

"It's all one big Spanish lesson," says Rick Gonzales. "The way the teachers teach the children is through activities. The curriculum is made up of a series of activities."

Rosa Linda, who speaks Spanish fluently, is one of three Spanish-speaking teachers at Aragón that designs the curriculum for the children. The children are taught Spanish through a series of classroom exercises that include art and crafts, songs, games and dances.

"Whatever they are coloring, when they are singing or playing, it is all done in Spanish," says Rick Gonzales.

"They are learning through doing, they are learning in context with what they are doing at the moment," he adds. "It is not just about looking at a blackboard and learning vocabulary words ... as young children, we learned our native language through the same type of process."



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Rick and Rosa Linda Gonzales, founders of the Aragón Spanish Academy.

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Rick Gonzales
Co-owner, Aragón Spanish Academy

Spanish courses

Children at Aragón attend classes either once a week or three times a week, depending on the course.

Aragón Spanish Academy offers several classes for children and their parents. For parents who want to share in their child's Spanish experience, the couple offers a parent and child course. The class is 50 minutes long and designed for children 2 to 3 years old. Preschool-aged children 3 to 5 can attend a Spanish class without their parents.

This class is tailored for preschoolers and is 1 1/2 hours long. Other classes include Spanish for Kids for home-schooled children ages 6 to 7.

Michael Borg, a native of Sweden, and his 3-year-old son, Eric, attend the parent and child class weekly. Borg, who speaks Swedish and about six other languages, felt his son could benefit from learning Spanish.

"The school's environment is very conducive to teaching children to become bilingual," says Borg. "I am very impressed with

the school. They are very engaged and devoted in what they are doing."

When asked what his favorite part of Spanish class was, 3-year-old Eric replied: "I like chocolate," referring to a dance and song the children learned in Spanish.

Many of the parents that bring their children to Aragón are bilingual, but many are not, Gonzales says. He says the children range in ethnicities and cultures.

Gonzales stresses that learning a foreign language is a gift.
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language is best if taught at a young age. "When children are young, the window of opportunity for them to learn a new language is widest open," he says. "Starting the process early on gives them an advantage rather than waiting until later in life (to learn) like I did," says Gonzales.

Ashli Allen, mother of 3-year-old twin girls, recently moved to San Antonio from Oklahoma. She says one of her daughters heard someone speak Spanish and she inquired about learning the language. They have attended Aragón once a week since August.

"(The staff) is so nurturing and they really help the children get adjusted to learning in a Spanish speaking environment," she says.

Allen was pleasantly surprised on a recent outing when she heard her daughters playing a game.

"They started playing eye spy in colors in Spanish," she recalls. "They are really picking it up. It will make me have to work on my Spanish now, too," quips Allen.

Bright idea

Gonzales did not grow up speaking Spanish. He says he understood the language a little, but never spoke it. It was while working for a local company and traveling that the idea for the school developed.

Gonzales' background includes serving as president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce from 1990-1993. He worked for

CCI Telecom as vice president after his stint with the chamber and up until the school was launched in January. It was while working for the telecommunications firm that they began to travel to a number of Latin American countries. White on his business trips, he met many Spanish speakers who learned the English language from immersion schools. "The idea, back then, was why don't we have anything like that here," says Gonzales. "I decided to pursue the idea of a (Spanish immersion) school for children."

Rosa Linda Gonzales, on the other hand, grew up near the Texas-Mexico border. She was fluent in Spanish and had a career in banking, serving as a vice president for IBC Bank — handling a number of international accounts for the bank. The couple began to research the concept of the immersion school. Rick Gonzales visited language immersion schools abroad to learn more. He spent several more years exploring the idea and finally

decided to open a school himself that would focus on teaching Spanish to young children.

"I identified the need here," he says. "I could see the need in myself to learn Spanish, and I could see that there were a lot of people who wanted to learn (Spanish) as well."

The couple left their careers to embark on their dream of opening the school.

Aragón Spanish Academy opened for enrollment in January originally at Los Patios. They were housed in a renovated building on the restaurant's grounds, but moved to the school's new home on Redland Road in May.

The husband-and-wife team stay busy in

their respective roles at the school. Rick leaves the Spanish lessons to his wife to conduct, while he handles the marketing and advertising.

"I couldn't have done this without her," he says. "She is such a natural teacher, and she has made so many sacrifices to make this school what it is."

To date, the school has 50 children on their roster. The couple plans to add more Spanish courses as enrollment increases.

"What gives us the most enjoyment is to hear a parent tell us their child blurted out something in Spanish for the first time," Rick Gonzales says. "It is so much fun to know that the children are learning Spanish, but that they are enjoying it, too."