

Teacher brings culture with language

By FOSS FARRAR

Staff Writer

reporter@arkcity.net

March 7, 2009 The Ark City Traveler

Livia Melgar Jimenez hit the ball last summer while playing her first softball game, in Wichita. The ball dribbled out a short distance, and she remained standing at home plate.

"What are you waiting for?" one of her fellow players asked. "You have to run."

"I have two more tries," she said.

Like many of her fellow teachers from Spain, Jimenez was unfamiliar with softball rules. It's a game they don't play in Spain. However, her husband, Alberto Queralto Hernandez, knew how to play and found the other teachers' attempts at the game comical.

"I've been doing sports all my life but that day I realized that some of those Spanish teachers didn't do sports," Hernandez said. "They could have been on 'America's Funniest Videos.'"

"When some had the bat, be careful - you didn't know where it was going."

Those teachers from Spain might not have known when to run the bases or which way to go, but they did know where they eventually were headed - to classrooms in various school districts in Kansas to teach their native language.

They are part of an International Teacher Program sponsored by the Kansas Department of Education. The program aims at filling teaching vacancies in languages, math and sciences, said a coordinator of the program.

"One of the fun things we do at the orientation is we teach them to play softball," said Phyllis Farrar, a co-coordinator of the program. Farrar focuses on world languages.



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Farrar - no relation to the writer - said that she works with the Ministry of Education in Spain to find language teachers. The ministry takes applications and screens candidates for the program. Then those who meet the qualifications are interviewed for Spanish teaching positions. This past spring, Farrar

traveled to Spain to interview 70 people and chose eight teachers for Kansas, including Jimenez, she said.

Jimenez said she was hired by the Arkansas City Middle School after a phone interview. She had taught the past year in a high school in England. Her husband, a swim coach in Spain, helped her get paperwork from the Spanish government completed in time for the two of them to make the move to the United States.

"When I applied for the program, they said, 'You can go to Kansas, Iowa or Nebraska,' and I decided to stay in Kansas because the northern states would be so cold," she said. "Then they passed all my information to the Kansas department."

Jimenez, 27, said she taught in Spain for half a year before taking a position at a town 14 miles north of London. She had decided to teach in England to broaden her experience and to improve her English language skills.

Foreign languages are a bigger deal in England than in the U.S., she said. In the English school system, one school has grades seven through 12, and kids in the seventh, eighth and ninth grades are required to take either Spanish, French or German.

Jimenez teaches an "exploratory" or beginning course in Spanish at Ark City Middle School. She says all but a few of her students are non-Spanish speakers who take her class for several reasons - because they hear some Spanish spoken in the hallways by the growing number of Hispanic students here, because their parents realize it's important to know another language, or for fun.

"English is the international language, but they know if they go south to Mexico or Chile, not everyone speaks English," she said.

On Thursday, a few eighth-grade students attending a first-period class taught by "Mrs. J," as they call her, gave their reasons for taking the class.

"I want to go to Spain," a girl said. "That would be nice," said another student.

Jeslin Polakowski said she is taking the class because she believes knowing Spanish would help if she got a job. It would help her talk to a Spanish-speaking customer, for example.

"She gets you into it," said Danni Rice of her teacher. "She's funny."

Jimenez said she likes the enthusiasm of her students in Arkansas City for learning, sports and other activities. She said that in her classes she tries to make learning fun by interacting with the students and having them interact with each other. She keeps the students busy speaking and writing as much as possible in Spanish.

Her students also are teaching her a few things about the English language, she said, adding that she knows her accent may sometimes throw them off.

"Sometimes they teach me to pronounce something," Jimenez said. "I tell them, 'If you don't understand me, tell me.'"

An example of the kids correcting her occurred when she was having them work with magic markers. "I told them, 'Check if your marker is drawing,'" she said. "And the students said 'writing.'"

That's what learning is all about, and it should be fun, she said. "I'm a very spontaneous person. If I have to laugh, I laugh with the students. If it goes on too much, they know when they have to stop."

While Jimenez is helping her mostly non-Hispanic students learn her native language, her husband is helping Hispanic high school students improve their English.

There are a few high school classes that are really tough on a student whose first language is not English - Shakespeare, for example, Hernandez said.

"There are students who have been here awhile, but they haven't mastered English yet," he said.

Hernandez said he sits next to ESL students in class - the newest ones, usually - and speaks to them in Spanish to help them understand difficult concepts better.

"It's kind of a challenge for them," Hernandez said. "It's more than knowing English, but how to stay focused and follow up with homework."

Above: Livia Jimenez teaches her Spanish class Thursday at the Arkansas City Middle School. Jimenez is from Spain and taught in Spain and England before coming to Arkansas City.