

Lamorinda Families Host Spanish Exchange Students

By Jean Follmer



Spanish exchange students and Lamorinda hosts enjoying a Giants game

Photo provided

Several Lamorinda families are hosting students from the Basque region of Spain this summer. The exchange program is managed by Edu-Culture International (ECI), a non-profit organization based in Berkeley.

Local ECI Leader Ken Beatus said the students are engaged in Bay Area activities during the day. Outings have included visits to the Golden Gate Bridge, UC Berkeley, Golden Gate Park, Union Square and the fortune cookie factory. The students also partook in a scavenger hunt in downtown Lafayette. During the hunt, they visited the Soccer Post and Take One Video before heading to Trader Joe's to find a product made in Spain. Beatus said they also "went to the beautiful Lafayette Reservoir and played soccer there." When Ken spoke to the Lamorinda Weekly, the students were busy learning about Thanksgiving at the Orinda Community Church; in addition to learning about Plymouth Rock and the pilgrims,

they made and enjoyed an entire Thanksgiving Feast.

Teacher Aitzier Goicuria traveled to the United States with the students. She said her students are benefiting greatly from the experience: "The relationship between the students and the (host) families has been great. We really appreciate the generosity of the American people. This is a way to grow in our mind and think...to take time to know other people and their cultures." Beatus agreed saying "I'm really impressed by the generosity of the Lamorinda families."

Moraga resident Bonnie MacNab and husband Steve Hanna have been thrilled with their experience as host parents. MacNab said "We had not done it (hosted) before, but would do it again in a heartbeat. Our Jon is absolutely delightful...he's a wonderful guy." MacNab said her son, Ryan Hanna, and Jon have developed a great friendship this summer. She said "Ryan went to Spain this summer with ECI. He loved it.

He'll be a junior next year and he'll absolutely go again next year." MacNab's experience with ECI "has been top notch. It's a first class operation."

The Caronna family of Orinda is hosting Aitor this summer. As the parents of two daughters, John Caronna said they thought it would be fun to host a boy. Caronna said "It's been a good experience for my girls, my wife, for Aitor and for me. He's so welcome to come back." The Caronnas have also enjoyed getting to know other families that are participating in the exchange program. They went to a 4th of July party at Bonnie MacNab's house and Caronna said "Bonnie's attitude was great. She ended up having 7-9 families there. It was a blast. That warmth was really nice."

The Peacock family of Lafayette is hosting Leire. Janice Peacock said her daughter, Kiera, and Leire "are both single children. This has been a nice experience for both of them." Peacock said "I think

one of the things that helped was Phyllis from ECI said to try and treat the exchange student as a visiting niece or nephew as opposed to an honored guest." Peacock said this helped Leire settle in and feel comfortable helping herself in the house. Peacock also said "The time has gone by very quickly. Already we're in a panic about things we haven't done." Peacock suggested that future host families "try to plan some things out because the time will go by incredibly quickly." She also said it's important to show the students about American life at home: "They get a lot of touristy outings in San Francisco during the day." It's important to teach them about American foods, even some American television instead of just focusing on "we're going to the movies today and tomorrow we're going to the zoo."

ECI Director Phyllis O'Neill said ECI has worked with lots of Lamorinda families in both hosting and traveling capacities. O'Neill said they helped Campolindo High School host a group of students from Austria last February. She also mentioned a group of Campolindo students is spending the summer in Germany as part of an ECI trip. O'Neill said the foreign exchange experience "really changes lives dramatically." On a personal note, she said "I've hosted over 20 students myself and my kids have friends all over the world." As a former educator, O'Neill understands the amazing experience a new culture brings to the educational environment. For more information on ECI programs, contact Phyllis at Phyllis@educulture.org or 510-845-3925.