

▼ MI ESCUELITA

# Spanish immersion preschool offers unique opportunity

**D**ora the Explorer and Ileana Reyes have a few things in common, most notably being their passion for teaching children the Spanish language.

While Dora is a cartoon character teaching children from TV land, Reyes is a real person teaching it right here in Westside.

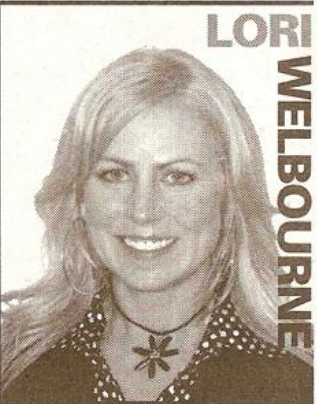
Unique to the Okanagan Valley, her preschool, Mi Escuelita (My Little Schoolhouse), offers Spanish immersion programs.

Canadian parents often place their children in French immersion to give them an edge later on in life, allowing for more employment opportunities.

Learning Spanish increases their options exponentially, not just with employment but with traveling as well.

In fact, Spanish is spoken world-wide by over 500 million people and is the world's third most spoken language after Mandarin Chinese and English. It also ranks second in terms of native speakers and is truly an international language.

Reyes opened Mi Escuelita in Lakeview Heights just last year. Prior to that she was working as an early childhood educator at TLC



**LORI WELBOURNE**

**Westside Business**

Daycare in Westside, where she started a Spanish program on Fridays.

It became so popular, so fast, she decided to pursue her dream of opening up a Spanish immersion preschool of her own.

Before moving to the Okanagan in 2003, she was an educator at the high-end Westhill Institute in Mexico City.

An internationally recognized preschool, students learn one or two languages in addition to their native tongue there.

But in Mexico, and many countries around the world, this practice is not unique.

Educators believe that introducing a second or third

language to a child before the age of six or seven is an important factor in their ability to achieve fluency.

So, even in public schools, learning more than one language is not the exception, it is the norm.

Reyes would like to see Canadian schools adopting this same approach to education.

"Children are like sponges at this age," said Reyes "It's effortless for them to learn more than one language."

On vacation from her homeland in 2003, Reyes met her future husband Georges, who was also on vacation in Vancouver.

He was fluent in English, Spanish and French, and they quickly discovered a bond.

Reyes returned to Mexico and came back to visit him in his hometown of Peachland that summer.

Not only did she fall in love with him, but she also fell in love with the Okanagan.

Making the difficult decision to leave her grown children and family behind, she set up a new life with her new husband in a new country.

She was immediately im-

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**ILEANA REYES** (left) and children at her summer camp program enjoying snack time together in the shade.

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# Learning Spanish fun for kids

**WELBOURNE FROM D12**

pressed with the wonderful opportunities Canadian children have here, but could see clearly that they weren't being given the right tools.

"Canadian children have so much potential," said Reyes. "Having the opportunity to learn another language will keep them globally ahead in this world."

According to Reyes, education is revered in Mexico

and teachers are considered to hold one of the most important professions in the world.

She would like to see the Canadian school system take big steps in providing children with immersion programs across the board.

She feels that every child should be given this invaluable opportunity.

Reyes teaches Spanish to grown up kids as well.

"Sometimes the parents want to learn what their chil-

dren are learning so they can make it a family experience," said Reyes.

"Of course, you can learn at any age, it just seems easiest for the little ones.

"Y es divertido (and it's fun), mucha diversion (lots of fun)!" Dora the Explorer would agree.

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