



BARB AGUIAR/Westside Weekly

As the school year winds down at Mi Escuelita Spanish Immersion Preschool, owner Ileana Reyes prepares for a party by hanging up a piñata the students helped make.

Reyes shares her culture while learning Canada's

As a preschool instructor teaching English to children in Mexico City, Ileana Reyes never saw herself operating a Spanish immersion preschool in West Kelowna.

"Sometimes life has surprises," she said.

Reyes, who was born and raised in Mexico City, first fell in love with Canada on a visit to Victoria when she was 16.

"It's a beautiful and respectful country," she said. "I wanted to live here, but I never thought it would come true."

She met her husband-to-be Georges Guillemot 11 years ago when they were both in Vancouver on vacation.

There was a spark, and after Reyes returned to Mexico and Guillemot returned to Peachland, they continued to keep in touch online and by phone.

The following summer, Reyes visited Peachland and decided to stay. Reyes admitted the first year she lived in jackets, even in the spring and summer. She found the first winter cold; however, as a sports enthusiast, she fell in love with cross-country skiing.

After Reyes moved to Canada, she worked in day cares and preschools.

In one day care, she started a Spanish program that became a huge success. Reyes and her husband found a property in Lakeview Heights with a separate building and opened Mi Escuelita Spanish Immersion Preschool.

In September, Mi Escuelita (which means "my little school house") will be celebrating eight years in operation.



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People Watching

At the beginning of the year, Reyes bonds with the children in English, but all the circle time, reading and songs are in Spanish. As time passes, Reyes switches to Spanish and said the children don't even realize. By the end of the school year everything is in Spanish. Students will sometimes reply to Reyes in English, but they understand what she is saying.

"It's amazing how their brains just switch from one language to another," said Reyes.

Neurons develop differently in kids who learn another language early in life, according to Reyes. It becomes easy for them to learn other languages. It's also important to Reyes to teach the children about Mexican culture.

"It's like travelling," she said. "It enriches your soul, your mind and your imagination."

They celebrate Day of the Dead Nov. 2 and older children help her bake the traditional bread, pan de muerto. As well, they mark Mexican Independence Day by making flags while Reyes teaches them stories and traditions of Mexico.

As the school year winds down at Mi Escuelita, they will celebrate with a piñata the students helped to make filled with small toys.

Reyes' program not only teaches children Spanish, it also works with cognitive skills, fine and gross motor skills and social and emotional interaction with each other. They leave the preschool prepared for Kindergarten.

She enjoys seeing life through the children's eyes.

"For them, life is amazing," she said. "They discover things that we as adults we take for granted, like when a caterpillar turns into a butterfly. Sometimes as adults we forget how incredible life is."

Although some of her students come from families with a Spanish speaking grandparent, most are Canadians whose parents want to give their children the benefit of another language.

Reyes offers preschool classes for children 2 1/2 to five years old. Classes run 8:45 to 11:45 a.m. either Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays or Tuesdays and Thursdays. As well, afternoon preschool classes are available Tuesdays and Thursdays from 12:30 to 2:45 p.m.

For children who want to keep up their Spanish, there is an after school program Wednesdays from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m.

For more information, go online to miescuelita.ca.

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