

Globe West

Day-care centers open their windows to the world Toddlers learn to walk, talk, and speak French

By Eun Lee Koh, Globe Staff, 1/4/2004

Linda Chery-Valentin envisioned day care with a French accent when she sought out centers for her own children five years ago. The Haitian immigrant, who wanted her three sons to grow up moving easily between her native tongue and English, searched for a place that integrated the French language into daily activities.

In her mind, she saw a day-care center that on the surface looked traditional, with children playing games, singing songs, and learning their first lessons. But you would also hear, according to her vision, a "bonjour" every once in a while, along with maybe a "j'adore," or perhaps a "Comment allez-vous?"

After visits to about 30 different day-care centers, Chery-Valentin said, she could not find one that matched. So about five years ago, she decided to start her own, opening a center out of her home in Natick for about 10 children.

"I had high standards, maybe too high, and I just didn't want to put my children in a place that didn't have what I wanted," she said.

As the program grew in popularity, Chery-Valentin grew out of her home. She opened the Arc-en-Ciel day-care center on Mill Street in Natick in 2001; she opened a second location in south Brookline earlier this year.

And the demands have gotten greater, she said -- so much so that she decided this year to partner with Margie Stuppard, who recently became part owner of the Natick center.

French lessons stopped temporarily in November at the Natick location to accommodate the ownership changes, and Stuppard said the lessons will start up again this month, when the center reopens under her stewardship as Le Petite Monde -- "the little world" in French.

Stuppard, whose husband is from Haiti and speaks French and Creole, also wanted her children to be exposed to French, as she did not grow up speaking the language herself. Stuppard began searching for day-care options a few months ago for her 4-month-old twins, and in the process, met Chery-Valentin.

"We had matching visions for day care," Stuppard said. "It was a coincidence -- a lucky coincidence -- that we met."

Chery-Valentin moved to the United States in 1985, speaking just French and Creole. During the past two decades, as she learned to speak English, she said, she has experienced firsthand the advantages of being bicultural and multilingual.

"Language is a window into people's worlds, and I have been lucky to be a part of many worlds," she said. "That's sort of what I am hoping will happen to the children who are in these programs."

Research has shown that children learn foreign languages better and retain more at an early age, but Chery-Valentin wanted to take it one step further. Before children even begin speaking their first words in English, she wanted to expose them to French as well. She said she has found that as the infants become toddlers, they show little difficulty switching between the two.

"Much of the learning is auditory and visual at the infant level," said Ginny McGibbon, the program director in Natick. "People don't realize that babies are actually learning and absorbing the sounds around them. They are actually learning, even at that age."

Although Le Petite Monde and Arc-en-Ciel ("rainbow"), are traditional in many respects, they are unique in that they offer a language immersion program for youngsters in their infancy as part of the regular curriculum, according to the state Office of Child Care Services.

Chery-Valentin and Stuppard describe the program like this: For about six to eight hours a week, the children -- who range from a few months to 5 years old -- are exposed to everything French. The minute the teacher walks through the door, she begins speaking French, using props and other objects to convey what she is saying. French music plays in the background as children play with their toys, and simple children's songs are also taught "en Francais."

The novel approach has attracted Americans and recent European immigrants -- few Haitians, actually -- who want to expose their children to a second language from a very young age, Chery-Valentin said. The two centers draw families from Framingham, Natick, Sudbury, Newton, Weston, Boston, and other communities. The two for-profit centers are each licensed to care for up to 35 children.

The popularity of the program shows how fluency in another language has become a valued commodity in today's diversified society, Chery-Valentin said.

Hannah Kilson, whose 15-month-old daughter, Zuri Kilson-Kuchtic, has been attending the Arc-en-Ciel center in south Brookline since she was six months old, said her daughter responds to both French and English greetings and sings along to French songs.

"If you watch the babies in the infant room, they just light up and respond," said Kilson, who does not speak French herself. "It's like they are saying, 'I don't know what you're saying, but this is fun.'"

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