

Inkan ambassadors | Hawaii Tribune Herald

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By COLIN M. STEWART

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Is it salty over there, and over there, too?" asked one of the Q'ero children with delight upon seeing, touching and tasting the ocean for the first time in her life.

She was assured that "it's all salty," said Elizabeth Jenkins, who -- along with Hilo's Connections Charter School and financial help from the Wiraqocha Foundation

-- is hosting four students, a parent and a chaperone from the Q'ero Nation in Peru.

Perched in one of the most remote spots in the Peruvian Andes, the villages that make up the Q'ero Nation are 4,300 feet above sea level, a full day's trip on horseback through the mountains to the nearest major town of Cusco, Peru. The children walk for three hours each day through the mountains to attend one of the only two schools available to their tribe.

Their stone homes have no electricity, and only recently gained some running water thanks to a charitable project funded in part by the Wiraqocha Foundation.

They consider themselves the last spiritual and cultural descendants of the Inka Empire, and the Q'eros' traditions remain virtually untouched by the outside world, providing a pristine looking glass through which to experience the region's language, music, clothing and other customs of the past.

According to Jenkins, president of the Wiraqocha Foundation, the group was originally slated to visit Ka'u to work with two English teachers there. After many months, the plans fell apart, however, and Jenkins was left scrambling to find a new school to host the students' visit, she said.

"Connections Public Charter School saved our program," she said. "... It was like a miracle."

In keeping with its mission of providing a multi-culturally themed education, Connections volunteered to take the students in for their two-month stay, and so far it's been a perfect fit for the school, said Principal John Thatcher.

"This is a very unique native American tribe, and it's been really exciting for our kids to meet them," he said. "We try to do things to expose our kids to as many cultures as possible so they can get that global perspective."

The visit was also made possible through the aid of Big Isle politicians, who wrote letters in support of obtaining visas for the children. Help came from state Rep. Bob Herkes, Rep. Cindy Evans, Sen. Josh Green, and Sen. Gil Kahele.

Since their arrival, the Q'ero kids have introduced their new classmates to their culture and learned about Hawaiian culture, as well.

Last week, they hosted special classes to teach their weaving techniques, which have been passed down generation to generation for hundreds of years.

On Friday, the Q'ero students greeted their new friends to school in the morning with a song, while wearing their brightly colored, traditional clothing hand-woven and dyed from sheep and alpaca

wool.

"You are a beautiful dewdrop from paradise," was the opening line as they sang in their native tongue, Quechua. The song was written by parent and chaperone Don Juan Apaza, and set to a traditional Q'ero tune.

A healer and musician back home, Apaza said through a translator that he and his children had been welcomed with open arms, and were very much enjoying their stay. He was especially impressed by the multitude of conch shells available here, which are very hard to come by in the Andes and are prized for their musical properties.

For the children, Hawaii has been a wholly alien and delightful experience. Their translator said trying to describe the differences between the cultures and the lands was like asking a fish how it is to live out of water.

The cars, the buildings, the flowers, the birds. All of it has been an eye-opener, they said. Nature is revered as sacred by the Q'ero, and the mountains that typically surround them hold great power and significance. Coming here and seeing the ocean has been both an intellectual, as well as spiritual, experience for them. It's also just been a lot of fun, they said.

The kids are staying with Jenkins and her family, and already they have discovered her son's iPod Touch. "It's been a big hit," she said. But when asked if there were any items they wanted to bring home with them, material items didn't rank highly.

However, Apaza said he and the children plan to sell many of the woven garments they brought with them at the Hilo Farmers Market the next few Saturdays. He hopes to earn enough money to buy an accordion to take home and use to entertain the rest of his village.

Rina Marta, 12, said she wanted to bring all her classmates home with her.

"They (the Q'eros) have become the most popular kids in the school," Thatcher explained. "The other day, some of the kids told me they wanted to learn to speak Spanish so they could talk to them."

While the children speak their tribe's ancient language, they also speak Spanish, as do many of the people in the area.

During the rest of their two-month stay, the students will visit a number of other charter schools, including Waters of Life, Hawaii Academy of Arts & Sciences and Innovations Public Charter School. They'll be focusing on learning English while sharing their ancestral knowledge.

If there's been any disappointment for the visitors so far, Jenkins said, it's been the language barrier.

"It's hard for them to follow what's going on, what people are saying," she said. "They want to learn English so they can talk to the other kids."

For more information on the Q'ero exchange program and its sponsor, visit www.wiraqochafoundation.org.

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