

Students learn African culture for journey

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By Emma Gallegos, Staff Writer

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(Photo provided to Highlanders) Students from the Creative Planet School of the Arts in Baldwin Park will have the opportunity to travel to Tanzania this February to work in a health clinic and help set up a performing arts program at an orphanage in Arusha. Pictured, from left in the back row, are Arianna Sanchez of West Covina, Celia Rodriguez of La Puente, Sara Varela of El Monte. Front row, from left, are Jackie Chavez of El Monte, Tiffany Reynosa of Whittier, Sascha Rios of Montebello, Julian Hinojosa of West Covina, Samantha Torres of El Monte and Cheyenne Reynosa of Whittier.

Students at Creative Planet School of the Arts in Baldwin Park swear up and down that their lives have been changed by their trip to Tanzania.

They'll point out the Tanzanian-shaped collage they made in the back of the classroom with snapshots from Tanzania. They speak Swahili. And if you ask nicely, they'll break into a Swahili song, "Mapambano," with haunting multipart harmonies. They might be able to tell you a thing or two about the way AIDS has affected the daily lives of Tanzania children their age.

"When I was younger, I was spoiled," said Sascha Rios, in a voice tinged with regret in a way that belies her 12 years. It's all different now, she swears. She's changed. But neither she nor any of the other students in her class have actually been to Tanzania - yet.

Rios and five other classmates have been scrimping and saving, practicing and preparing for a trip this February to Arusha, a city in northern Tanzania near the border of Kenya and just a few hours west of Kilimanjaro's shadow.

Accompanying the students will be 30 doctors and social workers from the Phil Simon Clinic, which serves HIV/AIDS patients at Huntington Memorial Hospital in Pasadena. Clinic workers are in regular contact with government, health care providers and others who provide education about health care in Arusha. And long before the school ever made plans for students to travel, students had been putting on shows to raise money for the work the clinic does, according to Billy Rugh, director of Creative Planet. Gradually, the students got more and more involved with the clinic.

It's not just about raising funds and awareness - they've been building relationships with the community back in Tanzania. The collage at the back wall of the Creative Planet classroom shows scenes of daily life from Tanzania. The Baldwin Park students had sent disposable cameras to the Tanzanian children and the photos that were sent back made it to the collage. Cheyenne Reynosa, 15, of Whittier said she's excited to meet the smiling faces in the pictures.

The trip to Tanzania is not just about those two weeks, and it's certainly not just about the six students who will be attending. Rugh said he's tried to incorporate lessons about Tanzania in all the subjects. Students have been studying Swahili and Tanzanian arts - dancing and singing and even painting. Julian Hinojosa, 12, of West Covina said he's been preparing by practicing the language and singing Tanzanian songs in the shower.

While the six students are in Tanzania, they'll have their hands full. The students will be passing out mosquito nets, distributing the toys that they've been collecting from the community and even visiting a nearby Maasai warrior camp, Rugh said. But their main project will be helping to set up an arts program similar to the one they've enjoyed at their school in Baldwin Park, where the visual and performing arts are counted as important as the three R's in their curriculum. This is the part of the trip that really has the students excited.

"We want to give them comfort through acting and singing," Rios said.

Rugh said that the Creative Planet students will help children at the orphanage put together a production during the afternoons when they come home from school. Students will also work to identify and train leaders at the orphanage who can sustain a performing arts program.

"The arts gave me the chance to do something great with my life," said Sara Varela, 18. "I can't wait to give that same experience to somebody halfway around the world."

During the day, the Creative Planets students will help out at the clinic - playing with the children who are there and helping doctors run errands. They might even visit shut-ins, those who are too sick to leave home, to help deliver medicines. All the while, they'll be blogging about their experiences so that the students back in Baldwin Park can keep up.

For more information about their upcoming trip or to make a charitable donation to help these students with their work in Africa please visit www.cpsoa.org.