

That little dose of Polish

Sitting in the front row with a pile of Polish textbooks at her side, 9-year-old Daniela Roth wrinkled her nose and hissed at her teacher.

It was a good hiss, the kind Dorota Flocke listens for as she teaches her young students to speak Polish. She wants children like Daniela to pronounce each syllable in a way that would make their grandparents proud.

Just two weeks since the Gainesville area's first Polish school opened, many-a-grandparent has already shed joyful tears during transatlantic calls from children eager to tell a story or read a poem in their native tongue.



Photo by: Aaron Daye/Gainesville Sun.
Gabriela Roth, 4, cuts out pictures from her schoolbook during a creative learning exercise at John Paul II: School of Polish Language & Culture, on Sunday.

The school's 15 students, from preschoolers to third-graders, meet in two small classes housed every Sunday at the Queen of Peace Academy off SW 24th Avenue.

Dubbed the John Paul II School of Polish Language & Culture, its course work comes from the Polish Supplementary School Council of America Inc., which supplies similar schools throughout the United States. The council has an overall enrollment of about 8,000 students.

The demand for such a school in Gainesville comes from Polish families who moved to the area primarily through the University of Florida and Shands. Many showed an interest in enrolling their children in the 30-week program, which costs up to \$327 for the first child and less for two or more.

Luckily, along with the need for a school came Polish adults willing to teach the classes. The school's lead instructor for first- through third-graders, Flocke, was a teacher in Poland years ago. And the lead preschool instructor, Slawa Maslanka, already taught Polish in an informal "school" she started when her granddaughter, Basia Andraka, was a little girl. Basia resisted when her own parents tried to speak Polish with her, but the lessons from her grandmother worked. Then more families showed an interest until, finally, there were more students than Maslanka could fit in her makeshift classroom at home.

Now Basia, 17, a senior at Buchholz High School, is so fluent in Polish - and so eager to pass it on to other second-generation children - that she's a co-principal at the school alongside her mother, Margaret Andraka. Basia traveled to New York City to visit Polish schools and learn about the curriculum, and she returned with a suitcase full of textbooks.

She also filled out the paperwork to get the school its nonprofit status and contacted Polish families about enrolling their children.

"We just know a lot of Polish people," the teen said with a shrug.

Basia made many of her family's Polish connections herself after joining the UF Polish Club. She plans to further spread the word about the school this summer when she speaks with Polish communities in other Florida cities.

"What can I say? She's a little entrepreneur," her mother said as Basia helped instruct the preschool class Sunday.

Their students range from fluent Polish speakers like Daniela to students who speak no Polish at all. All of them come from Polish families, but non-Polish students are welcome, too.

The preschool-age students sing Polish songs, read simple Polish books and learn basic words, while the upper-level class works in textbooks to learn more in-depth vocabulary and pronunciation.

If there's enough interest to expand the program, Margaret Andraka said there could eventually be high-school classes. The Polish school council's upper-level courses and exams often meet high-school- or even college-level language requirements, she said.

Andraka said the program fills a real need by bringing the area's Polish students together to speak and learn with each other. She said it will help families make strides in keeping the culture and language alive with their children.

"The main thing we want is (students to) get that little dose of Polish every week," she said.

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