



Oak Lawn students highlight Palestinian culture at event organizers hope will become annual showcase and ‘unify the school’

By JANICE NEUMANN
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From left, Sajida Mulhem, Jessica Marquez-Torres and Eman Zegar hosted a table with Historical Places and Significant Items at the recent Palestinian Culture Night at Oak Lawn Community High School. (Janice Neumann / Daily Southtown)

For some it was a night to show off their culture, while for others it was a way to reconnect with their heritage, and for everyone, the first Palestinian Culture Night at Oak Lawn Community High School was a way to show hospitality and make guests feel welcome.

Organized and run by students and staff, the event last week included tables showcasing the arts, foods, traditions and customs of Palestinians, drawing 100 guests.

“Food helps represent our culture,” said Mohammad AlSheikh, who was hosting a table on spices and famous dishes with fellow students Yousef Abbasi, and Assad Al Hushan. “They represent who we are. ... We resemble our culture through these dishes.”

AlSheikh, who also helped with a presentation on Palestine and competition on dialects, said hosting guests properly and meeting their expectations also plays a part.

“They expect to be treated in a blessed manner,” he said, especially on holidays, when the host’s special purpose is to show he or she “loves the guest.”



Maysa Alkisswany stands with her son Mohammad AlSheikh, who helped host a table with information on culinary delights during the first Palestinian Culture Night last week at Oak Lawn Community High School. (Janice Neumann / Daily Southtown)

After talking about various Palestinian specialties, AlSheikh said it was his mother who was best cook in the family.

Maysa Alkisswany, his mom, was on hand as well.

“I like it because there is a large number of Palestinians in the area,” said Alkisswany, who lives in Chicago Ridge with her family. “A lot of our kids don’t know about our culture.

“We have to show off we are Palestinians here.”

Student members of Arabic classes and the Arabic Honor Society helped staff the event and presented an introduction on Palestine, Some also participated in a fashion show. Everyone left with goody bags with Arabic sweets like maamool, Ali Baba and gummies.

“It’s definitely (about) being able to share our culture with everyone around us, especially Palestinian kids who feel disconnected from our culture,” said Sajida Mulhem, who hosted a table on historical places and significant Items, such as an embroidery and pictures, along with Jessica Marquez-Torres, Eman Zegar and Latifa Almatahen, all juniors.

“We just want to share the beautiful stuff,” Mulhem said.

Mulhem also read the poem “I Yearn for My Mother’s Bread” by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.

Marwa Elmasry, a foreign language teacher who ran the event with the help of language teacher Mary Kerrigan, said there are 22 Arabic countries and people may not be familiar with some. So Elmasry said they hoped to make the event highlight a different country each year, possibly showcasing Yemen next.

Sharing the culture “will help us unify the school,” Elmasry said.

Some of the students — both organizers and attendees — were born in Palestine and many have parents who emigrated from there.

“Palestine means everything to me because it’s where all of us are from,” said Adam Salloum, a senior whose parents emigrated here as refugees in 2002. “I think with events to bring knowledge to people, this can actually cure arrogance.”

Salloum said that his parents told him decades ago Jews, Christians and Muslims coexisted peacefully in Palestine. He said people can still break down those barriers.

“With the proper knowledge and understanding, we can change the world,” Salloum said.

Janice Neumann is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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