

A day in the life of the Piscataway

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On July 18, Crystal Proctor, executive director of Living the American Indian Experience (LAIE), taught the children how to make American Indian clay pots at the La Plata Library. The Piscataway women used to make big clay pots, put them in the fire, and once dry, the pot would be used to store necessities like wheat or grain.

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Local children experienced firsthand the life of a Piscataway Indian when the Piscataway Museum & Cultural Center brought one of their most popular programs to Charles County on Monday.

Children ages 6 to 9 participated in a Living the American Indian Experience (LAIE) program on July 18, presented by the Cedarville Band of Piscataway Indians. Called Papitám, the event at the La Plata Library allowed participants to meet, play and learn about Piscataway tribal heritage through activities such as pottery, jewelry and local native dance.

“LAIE provides exactly what our libraries need — fascinating, enlightening and enjoyable stories, experiences and activities from our local past,” Sarah Guy, Charles County Public Library program coordinator, said.

Papitám, meaning “let us play,” was the first program created through the Living the American Indian Experience. Papitám is a traveling, learning-through-play experience that educates and entertains kids Pre-K to second grade with culturally appropriate, Native American activities. The hands-on learning program introduces children to local Piscataway tribe heritage, customs and traditions through games, crafts and dance.

Amanda Dagle, academic program manager of Living the American Indian Experience, married into the Piscataway Nation and has participated in the program for many years. She said the mobile program started as a room in the museum, but the Piscataway Indian Museum & Cultural Center had a very hard time getting the public to attend. “We want to continue to go where the people are,” Dagle said. Thus, Papitám was made into an on-the-road model.

“I love that Papitám is designed for kids and the family joins in because of the unique content,” Dagle said. “They don’t know this information so they end up learning along with the children and it becomes an inclusive program. We set up so many learning stations with Papitám so that it’s very sensory friendly, multiple intelligence friendly and includes auditory learning. We like to hit all of those developmental blocks.”

“Papitám is great because it focuses on interaction,” Crystal Proctor, executive director of LAIE, said. “Papitám includes movement, but with more of cultural mixed with the arts aspect. We bring activities to the children that they may not get a chance to learn on a normal basis, like using a bow and arrow and learning my favorite dance, the robin dance. History does not start at colonial contact, and our children are missing out on the real history of this region.”

The Papitám program began with a story about the meaning of Papitám, and the children learned some of the Algonquin language. Then the children made clay pottery, Chesapeake-style jewelry necklaces made of shells and beads, and danced to a Piscataway song known as the robin dance. As the children learned and performed the dance, Proctor made the beat using a hand drum made from deer skin and a rattle made of bull-run.

Emma Jackowski, 7, and sister Isabelle Jackowski, 4, participated in the program along with Melinda Jackowski, their mother.

“My favorite part was making a necklace out of shells and beads,” Emma said.

“The arrow was my favorite part,” Isabelle said.

Their mother, Melinda, believes it is important that her children learn about the history and the culture of where they live.



“I liked the story in the beginning where they described and talked about the way life was for the Piscataway back then,” Melinda said. “The kids got to experience how the Piscataway hunted and how they make different things using the parts of the deer, because we don’t do that anymore in more recent times. I also like that it was hands-on and that is what attracted us to this program.”

While learning about the Piscataway nation, the children learned how to shoot a bow and arrow, with Piscataway hunting supplies provided by the LAIE staff.

La Plata resident Sara Young came with her niece, Caitlin Young, 4, and nephew, Brayden Young, 6. Sara said she loves that the library has created such great events for all local children to attend.

“I liked everything, the dancing, the jewelry and making the clay pot,” Caitlin said.

“I liked watching my niece and nephew do the bow and arrow,” Sara said. “The smile on my nephew’s face made that moment priceless. It’s very important to expose all children to a multi-cultural environment and to hear about those indigenous people who were here before us.”

Living the American Indian Experience will bring their other program, Kentkatám — “Let us dance” — to the Potomac Library next Tuesday, July 26 for children and parents to learn Piscataway songs and participate in more of their native dances.

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