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Montessori students get global education without leaving Wilton

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Montessori School students Hazel Samardzija, Quinn Dickinson, Tejes Prabhu and Laurel Aronian pose with a handmade 'peace flag' made by each school as a part of a new Save the Children program that connects students from all over the world.

WILTON — Second-grader Tejes Prabhu is quickly learning that children are not so different in Bangladesh than they are in Wilton.

The 8-year-old's class has been exchanging letters with children in a remote Bangladeshi community nearly 7,800 miles away as a part of the Montessori School's new partnership with the Fairfield-based Save the Children foundation this year.

As a part of the program, Prabhu and his classmates were paired with 8-year-old Uzzal, of Bangladesh. In their letters there's no talk of religious differences or geopolitical politics, instead the two have discussed their different interests and what types of games they like to play.

"He likes to play cricket, and his favorite game to play in his free time is Blind Man's Bluff," Prabhu recounted.

Blind Man's Bluff, Prabhu explained, is similar to Marco Polo, except the Bangladeshi version doesn't involve water or any communication between players. The point of the game is for a blindfolded player to try to tag his opponents.

Ashley Grob, the director of admissions for Montessori who also oversees the partnership with Save the Children, said it is small interactions like this between Prabhu and Uzzal which is exactly what the Save the Children program is all about.

"We feel it builds a very nice awareness for our children to participate in this program and have this kind of connection with children from other countries in a very personal kind of way," Grob said.

The partnership between the Montessori School and Save the Children began back in January when each classroom selected a child from their sponsored country, which spanned multiple continents, reaching the most marginalized children in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Mali, Nepal, Niger and Vietnam.

Once paired with a child beneficiary from one of the program's 120 participating nations, students had the opportunity to research their sponsored country and to communicate with their child directly through letter writing.

The program aims to create a personal connection and greater understanding of the issues facing children around the globe by providing a specific and tangible example of a child in need, and allowing for interpersonal connection between the students and the sponsored child abroad.

"It wasn't like anything we've ever done at school before, so I was really excited. I was excited to learn about someone who lives on the other side of the world, and I learned a lot of new stuff," said kindergartner Hazel Samardzija, who was paired with Gabriel, a 5-year-old boy from Bolivia.

Fifth-grader Laurel Aronian's letter to her sponsored student in Vietnam focused on fun activities, like a discussion over her favorite color. Her missive also included a

picture she drew of a cat, which is her favorite animal.

Students' interactions with their sponsored kids went beyond writing letters, too.

In February, students, parents and staffers came together to make hand-made peace flags for each sponsored country. Each flag was created on a heavy cloth canvas, with thumb prints outlining the peace sign. The February event also included a special station where families wrote individual and personal letters to the children in these different communities to be delivered with the flags.

This event, which drew a crowd of more than 60 members of the school's community, was specifically designed to gather parents, students and staff together to create beautiful and unique gifts to send to each of the sponsored countries, while sending a message of inclusivity.

"Save the Children's mission to help families around the world is really in line with (the Montessori School's) mission, and that's what we hope this program will teach our children," Grob said.

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