

## Polyglot Village Reveals a Different Face of Reno to a Longtime Resident



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I remember what seemed like 99% of my classmates wanting to leave Reno and Sparks as soon as they graduated from high school and people telling me there was nothing happening here. I went away for graduate school in Chicago, came back, later moved to France, and returned once again only to find something different from the place I thought I had left... but was it always there or had it come about during my absence?

In the past year since I returned from France, I have discovered that Reno is an amazing, multicultural place exploding in diversity more and more every day and never ceasing to surprise even its longtime residents. I should know. I have lived in neighboring Sparks since I was three and was recently stunned by the turnout at something fantastic I had never heard about before... the Polyglot Village.

A collaboration between the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and the Washoe County School District, the Polyglot Village is an annual event that transforms an ordinary space on the UNR campus into a European-style village where students interact exclusively in their language of study with native speakers dressed up as various types of “village people.” This year’s Polyglot Village took place from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on Saturday, February 28, on the fourth floor of the Joe Crowley Student Union (JCSU) on the UNR campus.

I arrived at around 9:30 a.m. the day of Polyglot Village, a completely last-minute volunteer who had not even pre-registered because I had thought a certain job offer would have taken me out of town by then. Finding myself still in town and having been alerted about the Village by a colleague at the Northern Nevada International Center, I could not resist the chance to try to participate in such a unique endeavor. Although it was initially thought that I could be a sub in case someone was sick, in short time I was scooped up by my former French professors who were all there and was recruited by them as a fellow “customs agent” complete with orange vest and hat (and a police star sticker that I probably had no business wearing, but made me look ever so official)! It became clear very soon that this would be anything but an ordinary Saturday.

In order to reach the Polyglot Village, students had to walk down the windowed length of the fourth floor of the JCSU, which had been decorated for the occasion with paintings of foreign landscapes. Coupled with the soundtrack of train engine noises in the background and the two posted “train station agents” (student volunteers) at the mouth of the hallway, the paintings and windows rather gave the impression of watching the scenery go by from the inside of a train. The “train ride” ended at what looked like a metal-detecting, walk-through gate, immediately after which was a long table – customs. It was only after passing customs and getting their “passports” hole-punched, which meant answering successfully a series of questions in their language of study, that students could proceed into the main room with all the booths – Polyglot Village with all its “shops,” its “post office,” and even its “jail” (for

those students caught speaking in English), where they would continue speaking with the various “shopkeepers,” etc. and getting their “passports” punched. The far ballroom was set up as the dining room where several multicultural entertainment groups graced participants with their performances throughout the morning and afternoon.

As a child of Colombian immigrants who grew up speaking Spanish at home, but also as a young professional who started learning French at age twelve and later lived and worked in France for two years, I was able to be a bilingual customs agent, helping students in both French and Spanish alongside my former university professors and some new friends – teachers from the school district, from Lake Tahoe... even students who were native speakers. I once did a Chinese exhibit up in Virginia City, I taught anthropology at Truckee Meadows Community College, I have played in a local Russian folk music orchestra called the Sierra Nevada Balalaika Society for four years, and I currently teach and translate-interpret for the Northern Nevada International Center... yet even my obvious exposure to some of Reno’s more international facets was apparently not enough to prepare me for this single day of concentrated multilingualism and multiculturalism. It was as if Northern Nevada’s international essence had been distilled and gathered up all in one place for a few precious hours of escapism. (Even though the German and Italian components of the Village unfortunately had to be canceled this year due to lack of volunteers in those languages, the French and Spanish components saw an inspiring number of students and classes from various area schools.) These precious hours were not only time spent helping out a worthy cause, but also an incredible opportunity to make new friends from various parts of the world – all living in this region! I made several friends that day – from France, Mexico, the Ivory Coast, Spain, and other places – and have seen a couple of them several times since then, as our friendships continue to grow from that initial date. And so, it would appear that there was more to Reno, Sparks, and Northern Nevada than met my eye... far more.

Still under the honeymoon effect of this one special day, I ask myself: Beyond challenging stereotypical notions of what this region is about, what is the value of an event like Polyglot Village? At first blush, the value is the same as the stated mission: to give students a chance to practice their languages of study with fluent and native speakers of those languages in contexts resembling those of real life and where speaking English is not an option. It was obvious from the reactions of the students – from shy to outgoing, shaky to competent – how very important real-world situations are to the mastery of any language and especially to the comfort-level of interaction, and how very crucial it is to make these types of situations available more often to all students from as early an age as possible. The effort to recreate a village and populate it with characters is also fun and adds to the feeling of “foreignness,” which might arguably make it feel more natural to speak in a language other than English.

But beyond fine-tuning a language in a recreated European microcosm, beyond even the significant excitement that comes from seeing how cosmopolitan our home region is becoming, I believe the deeper value of an event such as this is the very thing that impacted me the most – the lasting sense that Community is something that extends far beyond national borders, that a linguistic barrier need not be. Most people who grow up bicultural or have lived abroad for any stretch of time come to realize this, I think, as they become a part of a society that, from foreign, became home while they weren’t looking. How nice to try to impart this wisdom to our children and adolescents far before they ever even

leave the country. And I doubt that many came away that day without some of this feeling having rubbed off on them. Who could hold back laughter every time a “police officer” hauled an Anglophone off to jail with the pretext of having found “drugs” on them (actually a Ziploc baggie filled with salt)? Who could forget the playful bantering amongst students and volunteers alike amidst the mock seriousness of replicated real-world scenarios? Who could resist the contagious rhythms and harmonies of the international performers? We were all in it together and we came from many places to make it happen. Months later, I still cannot forget the camaraderie in that fleeting little fantasy world that everyone worked so hard and so earnestly to create, and I only hope that Polyglot Village will continue to grow with every year, maybe inspiring similar events, increasing its number of languages offered, or spreading over the course of a whole weekend.

Nevada is in the world, but the world is also in Nevada. Connections are being made every day like gossamer threads extending between us and every corner of the globe, and we need to foster them, to strengthen them, to turn them into bridges. We need to continue to support endeavors that open our children’s mental horizons and prepare them to enter the global society, now more than ever. I, for one, am counting the days until next year’s Polyglot Village.

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