This program is all about culture

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WILLIMANTIC — Simone Rodriguez brought her children to Puerto Rico for the first time this summer, where they enjoyed the beaches and rivers.
Her eldest daughter, Jalesa Brown, and Brown's siblings were exposed to the scenery, but did not learn about the music of their native land during the trip.
Instead, Brown, an eighth-grader at Windham Middle School, learned about Puerto Rican music and the culture through the Puentes al Futuro Bridges to the Future after school program at the middle school.
But, more than just learning about the culture, Brown was one of several student performers during a cultural event in the Betty Tipton room at the Eastern Connecticut State University Student Center Friday evening.
"It's great," said Rodriguez. "I love the fact that my daughter grew up

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Hispanic culture the theme of school event

(Continued from Page 1) up in Willimantic and she gets to learn about our culture, which she knew nothing about.”

The event, “Navidad en Nuestros Paises/Christmas in our Countries,” was organized by the Puentes al Futuro/Bridges to the Future after-school program at Windham Middle School.

The event was open to the community and it appeared the community was interested, evidenced by a packed room.

It included musical and dance performances from students in Puentes, festive music by Joe Diaz and his group, “Grupo Boriken,” and dances by performers from El Sagrado Corazon Catholic Church.

Prior to each performance, the audience was educated about the different types of music and dances being performed.

And, they got to be part of the show.

Luis Rodriguez, assistant director of the ECSU Center for Community Engagement, asked audience members to clap and dance to the various musical selections, many of which were Christmas tunes.

Before Diaz and his group performed for the first time, Rodriguez informed the audience about a guitar-like instrument one of the group’s members would be playing — the “cuatro.”

“This is the national instrument of Puerto Rico,” Rodriguez said.

A cuatro player is called a “cuartista.”

One of the dances performed by students in the Puentes program was “Raices,” translated to mean “roots.”

That performance, choreographed by Windham Middle School dual language teacher Yusonil Bonet, included dance rhythms from the Taino Indian, African slave and Spanish cultures.

The event attracted a large crowd of people from all walks of life.

“I studied in Mexico and I was interested to see the Mexican dancing,” said Ellen Colburn, a reference librarian at Eastern who lives in Mansfield.

Colburn studied in Mexico as a student at the University of Connecticut, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in Spanish literature.

As the parent of a 30-year-old daughter who has been dancing since she was six, Colburn said she understands how much work goes into dance performances like the ones Friday night.

Colburn’s daughter is a highland dancer, a form of Scottish dancing.

“I think this is great for kids this age,” said Colburn, referring to the event.

Rodriguez brought one of Brown’s siblings, Gulianna Cruz-Alers, who is in fifth-grade at Windham Center School, with her to the event.

Cruz-Alers said she enjoyed seeing her sister dance according to Rodriguez.

“She’s looking forward to joining the program next year,” Rodriguez said.

Windham School System Director of Family and Community Partnerships Bill Stover, who attended the event, said there are more than 450 students in after-school programs in Windham, including Puentes, which is at both the middle and high schools.

There are approximately 35 students in Puentes at the middle school, he said.

The program is funded by a grant through the state Department of Education.

Stover said he enjoyed the performances Friday evening.

“I think it’s excellent,” he said.

“Just wish we could do more of this stuff.”

Stover said approximately 80 percent of the students in the district are Hispanic.

The program Friday helped students learn about their cultures, Stover said.

He said programs like Puentes are helpful for parents, many of whom work multiple jobs.

“Parents see the after school program as a real safe place for kids,” he said.