

# Love of language boosts Spanish Club's numbers

By David Lias

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One may assume that the perfect place to meet University of South Dakota students of Latin descent would be the university's Spanish Club.

Turns out it's not so much an ethnic attraction that has the membership of the club growing on the university campus. It's a love, and a desire to master, the Spanish language.

That's why club members chose to hold a recent evening meeting at Vermillion's Mexico Viejo Restaurant instead of in a classroom on campus.

Deborah S. Van Damme, a professor of languages, linguistics & philosophy at USD, is the club's advisor. She notes that it certainly isn't unusual for Spanish clubs to flourish on campuses across the country.

"The Spanish Club here at USD is for non-native speakers. Usually what you will find in Spanish clubs (across the country) are people who are Hispanic but are not proficient in the language," she said. "Spanish clubs, years ago, were created for non-native speakers or people who were not proficient in Spanish to practice speaking."

"The Spanish Club at USD is a place to practice speaking Spanish, plus our goal is to make students culturally competent, meaning to put them in situations where they get the feel of the culture," Van Damme said. "I tell my students, 'Turn on the television, listen to music, and even if you don't understand it, start exposing yourself visually and start listening to the culture.'"

The club welcomes both non-native and native speakers of Spanish. There are a couple of native speakers in the club but the majority of members are not Hispanic.

Van Damme noticed that the club's membership remained small at first.

"It's not because there isn't a large ethnic diversity on campus, because there is. I thought, 'where are these people, why aren't they in the club?' So, we rewrote the mission statement, and we now mention



Members of the USD Spanish Club recently held an informal gather at Mexico Viejo Restaurant in Vermillion. The meeting gave students a chance to converse in Spanish with the restaurant's staff.

(Photo by David Lias)

that we want to include people of all ethnic backgrounds. That's one of our goals. We want to recruit all different types of people into the Spanish Club," she said.

Today, Lauren Bennett, a Spanish major from Walton, KY, serves as the club's president.

"Deborah (Van Damme) taught me in two Spanish classes last year. She said there was a need for a new president, and I said I would love to do it," Bennett said. "I really enjoy the club; we're going to be doing some really cool things within the next month. We'll be doing a Salsa dancing night, and we'll have a day when we'll be selling baked goods from Sharing

the Dream, the store in downtown Vermillion."

Van Damme encouraged the club to gather in places in the Vermillion community where they could better be challenged at practicing their Spanish speaking skills.

"Initially they were meeting on campus in the language lab," she said. "Vermillion doesn't have a lot, but it does have some pockets where Spanish is spoken. So I simply said, 'Let's meet in a Mexican restaurant, or go to Sharing the Dream, and put ourselves as much as possible in that environment.'"

Doing so, she said, helps the members of club meet one of the organization's

goals – to be culturally competent.

"Most of the club members are taking Spanish right now. We don't have any Latino students in the club, but we all have in common that we are interested in Spanish, and we all have in common that we like Spanish," Bennett said. "It's a great opportunity for us to talk with each other, and we're not intimidated. None of us are really fluent Spanish speakers quite yet, but it's easy to talk to someone who is at the same level."

"One of the main purposes of the Spanish Club is for non-native speakers to be in a situation that's not intimidating," Van Damme said. "When you put a non-native speaker of any

language with native speakers, it's a natural thing to tend to clam up and not want to speak," she said.

That's why the more relaxed setting of the club's recent gathering at Mexico Viejo, where a number of the staff are fluent in Spanish, is important. The atmosphere helps strengthen club members' ability to carry on conversations in the language.

"We speak with the waiters, and I always order in Spanish and try to enhance my speaking skills a little bit," Bennett said. "The waiters here are great; they are very nice, and are always speaking with us and trying to help us speak."

"What I hope to get from the club is an enhancement of my Spanish speaking skills," said L'tre Parks, of Kansas City, MO, who serves as one of the club's vice presidents. "I like Spanish a lot, I know it's going to be the dominant language in America in the next five or 10 years, I want to be able to speak Spanish and this gives me a great sense of the Spanish-speaking culture."

Parks, a political science major with a minor in English, hopes to attend law school.

"I think (learning Spanish) will be a great asset," he said.

"I find that learning the Spanish language is very enjoyable," said John Eri, a club member who is originally from Lagos, Nigeria. "I liked it in middle school and high school, and what I'm interested in doing is trying to master it as a third language."

"Knowledge of Spanish is going to be a great asset. Especially today, with Spanish being the second largest language spoken in the United States," Bennett said. "We're all looking for the same thing – experience, and trying to learn Spanish as much as we can, and we're trying to increase our membership as much as we can. We're definitely growing now, and that's really good."

## CLAY COUNTY SHERIFF PRESS BRIEFING

03/03/13 21:11 – A deputy responded to a car/deer collision. The deputy euthanized the deer and completed an accident report.

03/03/13 23:55 – A deputy responded to a burglary at a business in Volin to assist the Yankton County Sheriff's Office. Two subjects were detained inside the business.

03/04/13 08:04 – A deputy responded to a report of vandalism to a lawn in Wakonda. The deputy found that someone had driven across the lawn in a vehicle.

03/04/13 17:11 – A deputy investigated a 911 hang-up call from a rural business where there had been previous calls due to a phone malfunction. No problems were found and the phone company was notified again.

03/04/13 18:47 – A deputy responded to the jail due to an inmate complaining of chest pain. The inmate was transported to the emergency room and staff was assigned to guard him there overnight until he was returned to the jail after observation.

03/05/13 13:18 – A deputy transported a patient from Sanford Emergency Room to the Human Services Center in

Yankton for an involuntary mental illness hold.

03/05/13 19:08 – A deputy investigated a report of a 911 hang-up call from a rural resident. Upon investigation it was found the caller had accidentally dialed from a cell phone and was in Vermillion at the time.

03/05/13 23:17 – A deputy assisted the Vermillion Police Department with attempting to locate the source of a 911 hang-up call which appeared to be a domestic dispute in progress. The source was later located and a suspect was arrested.

03/06/13 10:57 – An inmate was picked up from the Human Services Center in Yankton and returned to the Clay County Jail after his mental health committal.

03/06/13 14:21 – Deputies investigated a report of stolen gravity wagons loaded with beans. This theft appears to be similar to other reported thefts in Clay and nearby Counties. The investigation has produced a suspect. Investigation will continue.

03/07/13 13:06 – A deputy responded to a report of a person being pinned between a pickup and a tractor at a farm near Gayville. Medical assistance was

provided until the patient could be transported from the scene by helicopter.

03/07/13 13:31 – A deputy responded to Wakonda to a welfare check request after a resident missed a medical appointment. The patient was home and was fine. This information was passed along to the caller.

03/07/13 19:05 – A deputy assisted Highway Patrol Troopers with traffic control and removal of cornstalk bales on Highway 46. It appeared the bales had fallen from a truck which had continued on. One accident was reported due to a vehicle striking a bale.

03/07/13 20:27 – A deputy investigated a report of suspicious activity in Wakonda. A resident

reported someone tapping on her windows and running away.

03/08/13 00:48 – A deputy responded to a rural residence after a report that a car alarm was going off. It was found that the car door was not fully secured which may explain the alarm. There was no other suspicious activity found.

03/08/13 12:38 – A deputy transported a patient from the Emergency Room to the Human Services Center in Yankton for an involuntary mental illness committal.

03/08/13 12:46 – A deputy investigated a report of found items in a wooded area east of Vermillion. The items were found to be stolen from a vehicle in Alcester. The information was

passed on to the proper agencies.

03/08/13 16:48 – A deputy took a report of someone knocking on a door in Wakonda and then leaving before the resident answered. Teenagers were seen walking in the area. The information was documented due to its suspicious nature and there has been other similar activity in recent weeks.

03/08/13 18:33 – Deputies investigated a report of two pickups damaging farm fields by driving around in them while they were muddy. One suspect is known. Damage estimates are being gathered and investigation is continuing.

03/08/13 20:26 – A deputy responded to a report of a disabled vehicle on Highway 46.

Traffic control was provided along with assistance moving the vehicle to a field approach and off the highway until the vehicle could be towed.

03/09/13 12:56 – Fire units were paged to a report of a fire west of Vermillion. Deputies responded to assist and it was determined the smoke was from a burn barrel and under control.

03/09/13 21:08 – A request was received to check on children left home alone in Wakonda while their father was at the bar. Investigation found the claims to be false. The caller said this information came from a friend whose name she does not know. The father was with the kids at a movie and there was no cause for concern.

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