

## A Journey around the World Taiwan students visit for Folk Fair



**Dean Poling, The Valdosta Daily Times**



Several South Georgia families host Taiwan students who are in town for the annual Azalea International Folk Fair this week.

VALDOSTA — To Eric Li, South Georgia is full of tall people who eat a lot of meat and cheese, who are warm in friendship but live in a place colder than he expected.

The 15-year-old visitor from Taiwan shares these observations in perfect English, all said with a smile. He and the 13 other Taiwan students, ages 14 through 17 years old, have selected Americanized first names for their visit to Valdosta and the United States.

Since arriving this past weekend, they have visited area schools, such as Valwood Tuesday. They stay with American host families. In their week and a half here, they eat at restaurants, visit South Georgia churches, attend various events as a group and with their host families.

Today and Friday, they will present shows sharing their culture with area schools and then with the public Friday evening as part of the annual Azalea International Folk Fair.

Serving as the State of Georgia's official international festival since 2008, the Folk Fair is the brainchild of Serena Huang, a Valdosta resident who is a native of Taiwan. She has also coordinated several student exchanges between South Georgia and Taiwan.

This year's festival is titled a Journey Around the World, featuring exhibits and more related to Latin America, Korea, China, Japan, Taiwan, Africa, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, India and other nations. The public event is scheduled as a dinner and a show, from 5-9 p.m. Friday, March 7. Participants can enjoy just the show with admission set at \$6, adults; \$3, children ages 5-12; dinner is an additional price.

Throughout today and Friday, area school children will see the Taiwanese students present their performances. Between the schools and the public event, the Taiwanese students will perform their production of the nation's songs, dances, and other cultural touchstones approximately a dozen times during the two-day period, says Jenny Lin, an English teacher with Fu Jen Catholic High School in Chiayi City, Taiwan. Lin and Father Anthony Pham, the school's chaplain, are the students' chaperones for the trip. They say the students have been working on this production for months prior to their trip to the U.S.

After being invited by Huang to participate in the Azalea International, Fu Jen Catholic High officials collected applications from students interested in making the trip. These applications were reviewed and 14 students were selected for the journey.



Hosting the Taiwanese students has become an annual tradition for Brian and Susan Sumner and their children, Savannah, a 12-year-old Hahira Middle School seventh-grader, and Kice, a 10-year-old Westside Elementary School fourth-grader. This year, the Sumners host Vicki, 17, and Coco, 15.

The Sumners open their home to the visiting students and also introduce them to area and American culture and cuisine.

From past experience, they have learned to prepare meat not as a full steak, for example, but cut into smaller pieces. The Sumners buy gifts for their visitors each year. The Sumner children play basketball, draw, play X-box, tag and share other games and activities with the students. The Sumners create a welcoming environment for the visiting students.

Meanwhile, the Sumners have learned more about the world and the people of Taiwan. They have made close friends with the students who have visited in the past and are visiting now. Brian Sumner says the first birthday greeting he received in the past year was from one of the past Taiwan students who stayed with the family.

"One thing is for sure," says Susan Sumner of their past experiences, "I do believe these students feel loved, and the hosts families feel loved. Tears are shed when it is time to say good-bye. Fortunately, all six of the Taiwanese students stay in touch with us through Facebook, and we can now send and receive voice messages from Valdosta to Taiwan."