



Students were on their feet for an exciting violin solo. AMANDA THOMPSON

# Cultural connections

*Latin band sparks excitement at Fort Braden*

**Amanda Karioth Thompson** Council on Culture & Arts

The acclaimed Latin band Orkesta Mendoza has performed in theaters and auditoriums all over the world but rarely in school cafeterias. More than 320 Fort Braden elementary and middle school students were treated to a live concert by the Tucson-based musicians as part of an educational outreach program offered by Opening Nights Performing Arts at Florida State University.

The band was founded in 2009 by Sergio Mendoza who said “we’ve done maybe two of these kinds of shows before. It’s something we don’t do very much. It’s fun and it was a good group of kids. They made it really easy on us.”

Bandmate Sean Rogers agreed and added “the set we played is the same music we play for adults. Those kids are smart and they know if you’re dumbing it down for them. We just go up there and be ourselves and talk to them and play the music that we play for anyone. I think they get that.”

June Moberly, the school’s ESOL Coordinator, believes they did. ESOL stands for English for Speakers of Other Languages and Moberly works closely with many Fort Braden students to help develop their vocabulary while encouraging them to maintain their native language at home as much as possible. “We have a significant number of students who are Hispanic. It’s about 25 percent of our student body so we were super excited to host a Latin band. I was pumped,” Moberly said.

The students were too and eighth-grader Desmond Nelson enjoyed the change of pace. “We definitely don’t see this every day. They introduced these new types of songs like Mariachi and a bunch of other types.”

See **BAND**, Page 4C

## Band

Continued from Page 1C

The musicians explained that Mariachi is a traditional form of music that originated in the Mexican state of Jalisco. From the stage, they asked where students were from and numerous answers rang out including Mexico, El Salvador, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Colombia.

That moment was poignant and reminded Desmond, a native-born American, “that no matter what kind of culture you come from, no matter your race, you can understand someone’s culture more through their music. You can relate to people more. In our country, we’re not really just one thing; we’re kind of all mixed up and that’s a good thing.”

Moberly was hoping the performance would resonate with students in that way. “I am a true believer in the arts. They go across culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic levels. It’s truly a language that everyone can understand and everyone has the opportunity to embrace it. I saw almost all the kids connecting with their peers. I think that speaks volumes.”

Arts experiences like this offer students and faculty members a more

three-dimensional perspective of others and can change perceptions and stereotypes, breaking down barriers.

“If you don’t speak Spanish in your home and if you’re not of Hispanic ethnicity, I don’t know the likelihood that you’d be watching Latin television or listening to Latin music,” Moberly pointed out. “If a child, for whatever reason, has never been exposed to different music, when they are, it’s enlightening. It throws the door wide open.”

Moberly and the rest of the Fort Braden faculty and staff make a conscious and consistent effort to celebrate their students’ differences while highlighting how much they have in common. “Sometimes when kids and adults provide a negative response to someone who they perceive as different it’s because there’s a level of fear or unfamiliarity. We put up armor and for some people that armor can look unkind. But with a program like this, everyone is having a good time, everyone is enjoying the music because that’s something that we can all get into.”

For sixth-grader Andrea Ruiz, who lived in Colombia before moving to Tallahassee, the concert offered a nostalgic and welcomed taste of home. “I hear Hispanic music all the time in my family but I haven’t been able to hear an actual band in front of me and be able to con-



Orkesta Mendoza performs for students at Fort Braden school. AMANDA THOMPSON

nect with that in the past four years. I miss it a lot. My friend and I were dancing together and having a lot of fun. She doesn’t even speak Spanish but it didn’t matter,” she laughed.

“The arts are a way to feel what other people are feeling or understand things that you haven’t experienced,” said Andrea. “To be able to make people feel

what they’ve been through, everything that they’ve felt in their life, artists can show that.”

*Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*