

'Aul' In The Family

Parents join to teach their adopted Kazakh children about heritage, community

By Kenton Robinson

Published on 8/7/2005

Stoning -- Where else on the planet Saturday could you have watched a bunch of middle-aged white guys build a yurt?

But there they were, in their Bermuda shorts in the grass behind Pine Point School, poking bent, hand-planed rafters into chiseled holes, then trying to tie the whole thing together with rope before clothing it in rough, thick sheets of felt.

"It's made of sheep's wool," said Norman Remmler of Providence. "This whole thing is made of wood and a sheep."

As silly as that scenario sounds, it was to serve a most serious and cheerful purpose. The yurt was nothing less than a symbol of the overwhelming love of an unusual group of parents for their adopted children.

A yurt, in case you've let your National Geographic subscription lapse, is a portable house of a kind used for thousands of years by the nomadic peoples of Kazakhstan, a country in middle Asia three time zones wide, between Russia and China.

And these, the adoptive parents of Kazakh children, had come from each end of the Eastern Seaboard to begin the education of their children, most of whom are still but toddlers, about their native heritage.

Dan Tagliaferro of West Paterson, N.J., T-shirt and baseball cap emblazoned with photographs of Dana, his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, over the slogan "Daddy's Little Girl," put it this way:

"We want her to have a real strong appreciation of her heritage, and we want to have that appreciation as well," he said. "We have a strong appreciation for the country of Kazakhstan because without them, we wouldn't have our daughter, so we want to never forget."

Hence the convocation of the Kazakh Aul of the United States, Association for American & Kazakh Families, an organization dedicated to helping the adopted children grow up American with Kazakh roots.

Just as a yurt may be called a portable house, so might an aul (pronounced ah-OOL) be described as a portable village, whose members support each other through times good and bad.

And the organization that takes its name from that word is designed to serve a similar purpose, to act as a support group for the parents of Kazakh children.

But, most importantly, it is designed to support the children themselves who will grow up knowing they are different from their American peers.

“If my child grows up in this, she sees there are all these other children that have Caucasian parents, she feels accepted, she belongs, and that's why we all go to these little gatherings,” said Donna Farinella, Dana's mother.

Or as Kristen Demshock and Brian Barth of Philadelphia, the parents of Annika, 2, succinctly put it: “We want to introduce Annika to her culture, so she knows she's not alone.”

Susan Saxon of Providence, mother of Sara, 5, and organizer of both the Aul and Saturday's event, said some 90 people were coming from as far away as Florida.

“Over 3,500 children have come here since the late '90s,” she said, and, since the Aul went public in March, parents have joined from 20 states.

“I think that's testimony that there really isn't cultural information out there for families like mine, and some families are really hungry for that connection,” Saxon said. “I think it becomes really important, especially as the kids get older. For thousands of years my daughter's ancestors were Kazakhs, and I think she should know about that.”

Saturday, they were exposed to their culture through stories, visits to the yurt and food.

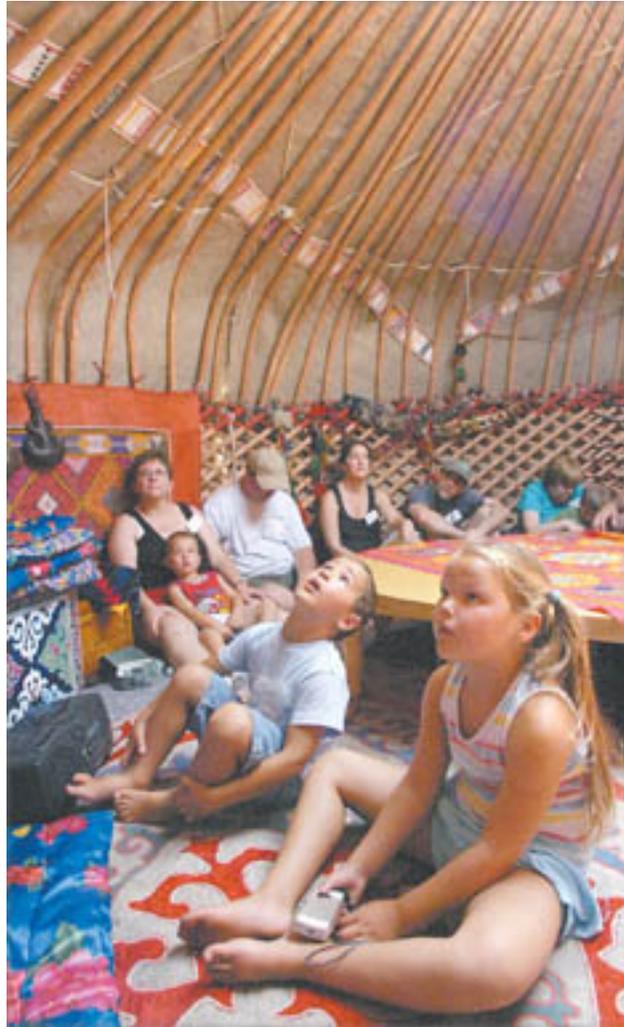
The main course, plov, is “an ancient food” of rice, carrots, onions and lamb cooked in oil, explained Dmitry Krieger, a Kazakh native now living in Rhode Island.

There was also boursak, “a very traditional food,” which Americans know better as fried dough.

But what was the food most in demand by the children Saturday? Mac and cheese.

The program will continue through mid-day today.

www.kazakh-aul-us.org.



Dana Jensen - Right, Kairat O'Toole, 4, of Upton, Mass., looks up at the hole in the top of the yurt and Daviana Englander, 5, of Cambridge, Mass., foreground, listens while Daniyar Baidaralin, formerly of Kazakhstan and now of Providence, not pictured, gives a lecture about yurts Saturday.



Dana Jensen - Above, Bakh Baidaralin, 15, formerly of Kazakhstan and now of Providence, ties fabric to a gate to mark the entrance to a yurt on Saturday at Pine Point School in Stonington. Guests passing through the gate traditionally tie a piece of fabric to a post to represent a wish and to leave negativity behind.



Dana Jensen - Members of Kazakh Aul of the United States, Association for American and Kazakh Families gather Saturday at Pine Point School in Stonington to honor and celebrate the ancestry of their children adopted from Kazakhstan.



Dana Jensen - *Kristen Demshock and Brian Barth of Horsham, Mass., sit with their daughter, Annika Demshock, 2, in a yurt Saturday, waiting for the start of a lecture given by Daniyar Baidaralin, formerly of Kazakhstan and now of Providence.*