

Enid News & Eagle

Enid High Islanders find friendship, pride, in club

By Mitchell Willetts, Enid News & Eagle, November 15, 2018



Kiyoko Amos, Jasia Malolo, Jennifer Jacklick, Evencilla Malolo, Monica Nathan and Vreanna Hicom perform a traditional dance during the second annual Enid High School Islander Night sponsored by the EHS Islander Club. (Billy Hefton / Enid News & Eagle)

"You never know when you're going to hear a ukulele in the building," Cindy Black said.

As an assistant principal at Enid High School she said the upbeat strumming is not an uncommon accompaniment to the school day.

It's one more sound among many heard through the halls, no less welcome than any other and no less distinct, though distinctly Pacific.

"There is not another district in Oklahoma that is like ours, that has Islander students to the extent that we do," Black said, "so we consider ourselves very special in a great way."

An ability to play the ukulele is common among the Marshallese, EHSI senior Ezola Hong said. She started to learn herself at 8 years old, around the same time her family moved from the Marshall Islands to Enid.

Playing at school is not typically her thing, but sitting with fellow members of Enid High's Islander Club, on Wednesday, she strummed and plucked out a couple melodies alongside her friends.

The ukuleles are school property, secured for the Pacific Islander students through a grant earned last year.

The Islander Club is open to any of the high school's 168 Pacific Islander students, at any time, no sign up, no registration, no dues necessary, club sponsor and ELL coordinator Lori Palmer said.

Hong has been involved with the Islander Club in some form or fashion since eighth grade, when it was first formed.

At that time the club was at Longfellow Middle School. She went to Waller, but didn't let that keep her from participating. Now she serves as club president.

"I feel like some of the students feel ashamed to have different customs," Hong said. "It is really different from the American culture, and I just feel they're scared to show their own cultures from the Islands."

A key purpose of the Islander Club is to instill pride in its members, pride in heritage, culture and history.

It isn't that Islanders want to hold themselves apart from the rest of Enid and its own cultures and customs, Hong said, as people sometimes think is the case with the Marshallese.

As far as the club is concerned, it's more a matter of not losing sight in what makes the Marshallese unique, the cultural influences that play a part in shaping who they are, and to see these differences as a positive thing worth celebrating.

"It's more than just a club, it's like a way of making others aware of us and the culture," club Vice President Jesse George said.



Islander Club Treasurer Lorina Jibas pauses from playing ukulele to talk with fellow club members Wednesday at Enid High Achool. Jibas, now a senior, has served as club treasurer since she was in ninth grade. (Mitchell Willetts / Enid News & Eagle)

Islander Night, which will be held in springtime this school year, is the annual culmination of celebrating the culture.

Much of the work Islander Club members do is to prepare for the one night a year they showcase who they are, and to share their culture with those outside of it.

George said he sees plenty of Islanders at Islander Night, which makes sense, but added he wishes he saw more non-Islanders. "I want everyone to come out so they can experience it."

Work on this year's Islander Night is ongoing, and a date is yet to be set, but it will happen, Palmer said.

The celebration, and the work the club puts into it, has helped make things easier for Marshallese and other Islander students in Enid, Palmer said.

"Seven years ago, I don't think that the other students, they didn't understand (the Marshallese) as much," Palmer said of when she first started working in the school

district. "Now, seven years later, I think everybody is a lot more understanding and accommodating than we were."

EPS as a whole has been deliberate about creating an open and accommodating environment for Pacific Islander students, Black said, and the combination of faculty and student efforts have helped make Enid schools a comfortable place.

"We want them to celebrate their culture and still have that as part of them here at the high school," Black said. "Our entire student body and faculty have an opportunity to learn from these students about what goes on in their lives and how things are for them ... that other kids and teachers across Oklahoma have no idea."