



Emerging Ambassadors

The steady beat of a djembe vibrates off the walls of a classroom in the Cathedral of Learning. “*Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq,*” Mama Kadiatou shouts, keeping count in French. Nineteen students, from grades 8 to 12, all in socks or barefoot, are learning a West African dance. They struggle to keep up as the instructor steps left, then right, then twice forward, all while making long, swooping hand motions at her side. Simultaneously, the students attempt to imitate her French, muttering “Un, doe, twa, cinc.” Some laugh. They feel silly doing movements they’ve never seen, speaking a language most of them have never spoken.

“No laughing,” interjects Mama Kadiatou, the dance instructor from the Republic of Guinea. “Nothing’s funny.” She’s strict, but the students understand. They’re here to appreciate other people’s customs and cultures. They’re all taking part in the “I Want To Be An Ambassador!” program, which teaches

middle and high school students how to work together in solving global problems.

The program, launched this year by Pitt graduate Hilda Pang-Fu (SIS ’76G), familiarizes students with the tasks of government ambassadors and gives youngsters insights into how to be ambassadors in their everyday lives. Broad topics include cross-cultural etiquette, conflict resolution, media, and religion. The students also spend two days in Washington, D.C., visiting actual embassies.

Pang-Fu is the president and founder of Luminari, a nonprofit organization that inspires people to develop unique educational programs. She teamed up with Pitt’s University Honors College to host the inaugural ambassadors program, a weeklong event that occurs in the summer.

On this day in ambassador school, Mama Kadiatou announces that it’s the girls’ turn to learn a separate dance routine. Pitt student and camp counselor Zhanjun Chen gets up to dance with them, a large grin spread across her face.

Some girls share Chen’s enthusiasm; others move with trepidation. Chen, a sophomore majoring in sociology, psychology, and women’s studies, came to the United States last year from Beijing. Her presence demonstrates firsthand for the students what it means to be an ambassador.

Now, it’s the boys’ turn. One has a particularly difficult time with the choreography. “Move your foot to the left,” another whispers, demonstrating the step. The program is already doing its job—the students are working together, cooperating to solve a problem and to better understand another’s situation.

—Sarah E. Beauchamp