

# WILSONVILLE SPOKESMAN

February 2008

## SHE HAS THE WORLD AT HER FEET

By **MICHELLE TE**  
WILSONVILLE SPOKESMAN

It's a good thing social studies is Whitney Wagner's favorite school subject — she's spent much of her life either immersed in the Spanish language or traveling to foreign countries.

A recent two-week trip to Peru for a class project added to the experiences she's already gained. The Wilsonville fifth-grader stayed with a host family, attended school with her peers and traveled around the country.

"I think it was a really beautiful place and I'd definitely go back to see the friends I made there," she said. "The beaches are really pretty and I like the culture."

Wagner traveled to Peru with her classmates and teacher as part of the fifth-grade curriculum at The International School in downtown Portland, where she has been attending since preschool.

Her father, Danton Wagner, accompanied Whitney on the trip, and her older sister Sierra came down a week later.

"Our class studied the history and culture of Peru so the students were really able to understand and appreciate what they saw on the trip," said International School teacher Costanza Wilkes, a native of Colombia.

Each student stayed with a separate host family in Lima, Peru, and attended school with host-sisters and brothers for one

week.

Wagner said she really enjoyed her family.

"They were really nice," she said. "(The host sister) was an only child, and they had a dog."

She also attended "a really big school," where she was required to wear a uniform consisting of a skirt and sweater, which she called "very fun, and very formal."

On their first day in Peru, Whitney and her father visited the beaches and took surfing lessons. Danton then left his daughter with her host family in order to visit his own South American destinations.

"Surfing was a blast," Danton said. "I took all nine kids, we all went to the beach, and got lessons. One of the top women's surfers in the world is from Peru, and the kids seemed to know that. So that was a highlight."

While in Peru, Wagner said he was able to visit Machu Picchu, Cuzco and the Sacred Valley, all impressive sites.

"It's genuinely one of the seven wonders of the world," he said, "just the tranquility and the location, you could almost picture what it was like up in the highlands."

On Machu Picchu, the family was also hoping to play the zampónias, a South-American wind instrument, but weren't allowed, Whitney said, because authorities thought that people might start asking for money.

### EXTENSIVE TRAVEL

Danton comes from a position of strength when talking about the seven wonders. He and his wife Diane have taken their two

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SUBMITTED PHOTO

**Whitney Wagner, 10, of Wilsonville, spent two weeks in Peru as part of a school project for The International School, where she is a fifth grader.**

daughters to five continents and 26 countries, including 18-months spent living in Spain.

“We wanted to provide them with a multilingual education, where they could be fluent in a

language and not have to worry about picking it up in high school or college,” he said. “Whitney has been in the Spanish program at The International School since preschool and consequently, she’s fluent with no detectable accent.”

To “test” their daughter, the family enrolled Whitney in local schools where there were no English speakers. It was a success.

“It was a seamless year,” he said. “You couldn’t tell the difference between her and the other kids, except maybe the blond hair.”

Overall, the Wagners are happy with their decision to put their daughters in a Spanish immersion program, where every subject – except English – is taught in Spanish. Ironically, the only difficulty Whitney had early on was with English.

“We speak English at home, but she wasn’t learning verbs, sentence structure, reading, as much as she would have in a non-immersion school,” Danton said. “There was a little bit of a drop off, but by the third or fourth grade, she was right on.”

Now, the hard part is finding a middle school that offers advanced language skills. Sierra is attending Gilkey Middle School, a French-American school. She took French for one year, but is now back in a Spanish program.

Meanwhile, the family is planning another summer adventure — this time to China.

In the meantime, Whitney plans to stay busy with her studies, soccer, bandpipes and reading.

Her favorite book? “Inkspell,” by Cornelia Funke. ■