

I had the great honour of being part of an inspiring team of people whose goal was to be sure as many people as possible could take part in a fun-filled family-focused celebration of the Lunar New Year at City Centre Mall this past Saturday, February 5th. Participants performed, paraded, painted a tile (that would become part of a magical zodiac mosaic), played carnival games, made crafts, volunteered, or simply watched this all happening under festive red lanterns. The place was filled with Asians and non-Asians together hailing in the Year of the Rabbit.

The Edmonton Chinese Bilingual Education Association (ECBEA) hosted this public event with participants from all 12 Mandarin bilingual schools (kindergarten to grade 12) within the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB), and many community organizations such as dance and martial arts groups.

As parents of three children in the Mandarin program (grades 2, 5, and 6 at Meadowlark Elementary), my husband and I are automatically members of the ECBEA. We have always appreciated this and other events the ECBEA (a wholly volunteer-based group) help to organize. When we could – which was less often than we hoped – we also volunteered some of our time. This is the first year that I have been blessed with finding some more time to be able to add my small part helping to organize this New Year celebration.

It was thus all the more exciting (and exhausting!) witnessing the culmination of the ECBEA's efforts, resourcefulness, energy and team spirit. My greatest joy came from seeing nervousness transform to pride after the many children prepared for and performed their cultural dances, martial arts displays, musical talents, and plays in front of their families and the general public. Seeing the beaming parents, the huge smiles of little ones mesmerized by the lion and dragon dances, the enjoyment of all the audience, was the best payback. Knowing how much my own children cherish being part of this event (they have not stopped talking about it yet) is the icing on the cake.

It is incredible to reflect on all who and what came together on Saturday. There was much excitement when the God of Fortune paraded throughout City Centre Mall with drums and cymbal clashing winding his way with the 12 Chinese Zodiac animals in tow (grade 6 students in costume), attracting the crowds to our event.

We were distinguished with speeches given by EPSB Trustee Michael Janz, Edmonton City Councilor Ben Henderson, Alberta Minister of Education Honourable Dave Hancock, and Consul Liu Jingdong of the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Calgary.

Winners of the Heart Health Contest, students from all grade levels, received their awards at a special ceremony at City Centre Mall. The contest was initiated by the CK Hui Heart Centre at the Royal Alexandra Hospital and ECBEA to bring public awareness to heart health issues, first to the Chinese community with the intention to be expanded to other cultural groups. The contest was open to all Chinese Bilingual students in the EPSB schools. The friendly competition resulted in some fine artwork and well researched articles.

In addition to the talented and varied performances already mentioned, lighthearted entertainment was had with our 'Are You Smart Enough to Be Taught Mandarin by a 5th Grader?' game show. In this segment, contestants – including an English teacher at one of our schools, EPSB Trustee Catherine Ripley and the Honourable Dave Hancock, had to repeat a Mandarin phrase taught to them in just 30 seconds on stage by 5th grade Chinese Bilingual

students. The contestants were then 'judged', in a spirit of fun, by Principal Ken Lam as to what they actually said compared to what they tried to say in Chinese.

We also had Alberta's own internationally renowned artist Lewis Lavoie, who has been commissioned to paint for Queen Elizabeth II and Prime Minister Stephen Harper, leading our bilingual students on-site in the creation of a "13th zodiac" Panda mural. A Rotary International exchange student from Switzerland even painted one of the mosaic tiles. The Panda will be on permanent display at the CK Hui Heart Institute. Over the prior 18 months, Lavoie had worked with students at each of the 12 schools in painting tile mosaic murals of the 12 traditional zodiac animals. These colourful murals were on display all together for the first time ever at the New Year celebration. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the ECBEA executive and event Chair, for letting me be part of this occasion. Huge thanks to all the amazing students and volunteers who made this day a success!

I encourage all of you, even if you may have just a small amount of time or talent, to selfishly reap the rewards of volunteering as I was honoured to be able to do this New Year. Wishing a healthy and prosperous New Year to all,

Heather-Jane Au