

Fitchburg schools' campers put fun on stage

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FITCHBURG -- Greek goddesses, an evil villain and a dog named chicken. In other words, a scene that could only emerge from the minds of children who were encouraged to embrace their curiosity.

This scene comes from a play written by several students who, throughout July, took part in the Fitchburg Public Schools' Camp S.U.N., a four-week program that combines learning activities with some summer camp staples: socializing, sunshine and play.

"All of the activities are academic-based, but the way that its presented to the kids is more of a hands-on, experience-based learning as opposed to rigor and structure," said camp co-director Sue Tourigny, a physical education teacher.

At Camp S.U.N., students in elementary and middle school participate in projects ranging from cooking, computer programming, Lego robotics, dance, singing and theater. The camp invites community members to its home at Crocker Elementary School to lead weekly specials, this year featuring visits from Westminster's Blue Star Planetarium and drummers from Fitchburg Art Museum.

The month-long summer program capped off with an exposition displaying group projects students worked on during the four-week camp. It took the format of a variety-show-meets-science-fair, with students who chose performing arts projects taking the stage to sing, dance, and act original pieces before an audience of well over 100 parents, friends and family members.

A group of girls bristled with excitement minutes before performing their original play.

Home-schooler Adonijah Copeland, 11, described how she and her team of budding thespians dreamed up their plot, which featured a group of Greek goddesses presiding over an Egyptian kingdom inhabited an unfunny comedian, a muscle-obsessed prince and a dog the young playwrights named, Chicken.

"We wanted everyone to have the part they wanted," explained Copeland, who wore her grandmother's demure white dress in preparation for her role as an all-powerful goddess. "And then it hit us, goddesses rule in Greek Mythology."

The performance by Copeland and her team evoked near constant laughter from the audience. After their play, another group of students sang modern pop, then a different group belted the lyrics to a song called "It's Our Time."

Paraprofessional Kwajalein Gibbs coached the students in the final singing act, conducting her summer-camp choir as audience members scarfed down ice cream.

Onlookers cheered as the students hit their final note.

"They made me proud," said a smiling Gibbs as she left the stage. "They really worked very hard, and they loved doing it. They really made me proud."