



Naperville Cultural Center makes debut Friday

By **Ann Piccininni**
STAFF WRITER

When Michelle LeBlanc was growing up in Naperville, her mother, born in Japan, wanted her to become acculturated.

"My mother wanted me to be American," she said.

LeBlanc said she's proud to be an American and she's grateful for her mother's concerns.

She also wants to celebrate her roots. And she wants others to have the opportunity to do the same and to explore cultures other than their own.

This weekend, LeBlanc is opening the Naperville Cultural Center.

"The mission of this cultural center is to promote peace through an understanding of the world's cultures and communication through art, language, music, movement and meditation," a statement on the center's Web site, at www.naperculture.org, reads.

Her mother, Emiko, was born in Japan and moved to the U.S. when she married LeBlanc's father, Edward, whose ancestry was Irish and Bohemian.

LeBlanc's father has passed away. Her mother lives in Naperville. And LeBlanc has been back in her original hometown, Naperville, for about seven years, since she moved back from New Orleans.

By the way, she said, several of her husband, Daniel's, extended family members lived in New Orleans. Some, she said, have now been relocated to Houston, Texas.

LeBlanc herself lived in New Orleans for about five years. She attended the University of New Orleans, which she describes as "now underwater." She later completed work on her bachelor's degree in corporate accounting at North Central College.

To help with Hurricane Katrina relief, LeBlanc said the center is collecting phone cards and used cell phones. Bridging communications gaps is crucial for people who have been transported and separated, she said.

The cultural center is also accepting donations of new T-shirts and socks, school supplies, business attire, old eyeglasses and pet supplies for hurricane victims, according to the center's Web site.

With a husband and three children of her own, LeBlanc wants her family to appreciate and celebrate their cultural heritage.

"They will be taking Japanese (language classes)," she said of daughter Daisy, 9, and sons Raven, 7, and Sky, 6.

So far, plans call for the cultural center to offer language classes in Japanese and Filipino. The center also offers classes in art, creative writing, music and what is described on the Web site as a "raucous math class."

There also is a retail store that offers culturally significant items and artworks.

After the center has been in operation for a while, LeBlanc said, she would like to add more language classes and maybe a computer art class and a class wherein students take apart and reassemble computer hardware.

Making art accessible is important, she said.

"Being an artist is expensive. Basically, you don't make a lot of money in it," she said.

Parents, she said, are more apt to encourage their children to pursue lucrative careers in medicine or law, to the exclusion of careers in art.

"I think that hinders our growth, spiritually," she said.

Two yoga studios, Universal Spirit Yoga, formerly housed in a space on Aurora Avenue, and Fun Lovin' Yoga, a yoga studio geared toward children, will also be housed inside the cultural center's expansive 2,400 square feet on the second floor of the Main Street Promenade building in downtown Naperville. The center address is 55 S. Main St., Suite 211.

LeBlanc explains that the yoga studio operators are independent contractors.

As director of the nonprofit Naperville Cultural Center, LeBlanc will have a staff of two receptionists.

A grand-opening celebration will be held from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday, 1 to 8 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday. The celebration will feature an artists' reception and winetasting from 5 to 8 p.m. Saturday. There also will be reflexology, face painting, henna tatoos, relaxation with aromatherapy and a belly dancing performance during the weekend.

LeBlanc said the center's opening is the realization of a long-cherished dream.

"I kind of call this my big art project," she said.

Naperville Cultural Center

The nonprofit organization will have a grand-opening celebration Friday through Sunday at 55 S. Main St., Suite 211, Naperville. Call (630) 696-4177 or visit www.naperculture.org.