



HERALD PHOTO BY IAN MARTENS

Daycare centre director Monica Munoz is looking forward to opening the Spanish Montessori Learning Centre later this month.

New daycare offers some spice

Spanish Montessori Learning Centre set to open Sept. 15

By **SHERRI GALLANT**

Lethbridge Herald

A new daycare centre opening soon in the city offers youngsters an opportunity to become bilingual, in a bright and inviting Montessori school setting.

Monica Munoz is director of the Spanish Montessori Learning Centre, (SMLC) where new signs went up Wednesday, touchable Montessori learning tools (called manipulatives) are still arriving to fill the bookshelves and renovations are nearly complete.

"The children will be able to start coming Sept. 15," said Munoz, who is excited to see her life-long aspiration finally come to fruition.

"This is my dream for a long, long time. I have been a teacher for 16 years, in Colombia (South America), in Montreal and in the U.S. We saved and have planned for a long time to open our own centre and now many people want to learn Spanish."

Munoz has a master's degree in special education and she embraced the Montessori method early in her career. She and her staff are qualified in Montessori pedagogy and early childhood education. In addition to the Spanish immersion daycare, the

centre will offer services before and after school, after-school education assessment and help with school work and summer programming.

Montessori already has a solid footing in Lethbridge, where a private preschool and kindergarten, Lethbridge Montessori School, has flourished for years and where the public school district has embraced the concept enough to offer Montessori instruction in two schools. Heetwood Bawden has Montessori classes for Grades 1 through 5 and Gilbert Paterson offers it for Grades 6 and 7.

Spanish language is still taking baby steps, however. Munoz is aware that once children have been in her program for a few years and become fluent, there are no Spanish immersion schools where they can register. Spanish is available as an option only in high school, but if the interest is there, Munoz will hold Spanish classes for children and adults Thursday and Friday evenings, and Saturday mornings.

SMLC has space for 46 children from infants to age six.

"Many centres are not taking babies anymore, but there is a need, so I can take eight babies. We have all the cribs and the high chairs ready to go."

At the back of the centre is a fenced-in yard where playground equipment

is being installed and where Munoz will create a garden so the children can learn to grow vegetables.

Montessori is a learning method developed in the early 1900s by Italian physician Maria Montessori, who became intrigued with educating youngsters who were deemed unteachable. Her methods were so successful that early reviewers dubbed her a miracle worker. Montessori puts children together in three-year age groups where natural mentorship evolves, and sensory stimulation with music, language and hands-on materials allows children to engage more parts of the brain as they learn new concepts.

As the number of Spanish-speaking immigrants continue to grow in the city, Munoz sees the need for a centre like hers to grow too, but so far all the children registered at SMLC are from English-speaking families.

Munoz, her husband Jose and their son Simon spoke no English when they left Colombia eight years ago and moved to South Carolina. Now, Simon is a French Immersion student in high school and is living proof that once a child has mastered two languages, they can readily learn a third.

SMLC is located at 1208 3 Ave. S. For information call 403-524-3436 or 403-593-2344.