By ROBERT PIERCE

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The customs of an American Christmas are familiar to most living in this country, but few outside the Hispanic population are familiar with the holiday traditions of one of the nation's fastest growing demographics.

One of those few, Vicki Raines, has been teaching Spanish at Southwestern Heights for three decades, and she has made her students considerably aware of Hispanic Christmas customs.

"Every year during the Christmas season, we do a research assignment on Christmas customs in Mexico and other Spanish speaking countries, with kind of an emphasis on Mexico because that's where a lot of our kids have connections," she said.

On Dec. 17 and 18, 2009, Raines continued the tradition of the study of "La Navidad," as students at Heights constructed pinatas for 2nd graders at Plains and Kismet elementaries to break. This, she said, is one of the holiday celebration activities children in Mexico enjoy doing.

"We have the second graders from each grade school come to the junior high and get to break the pinatas and scramble for the candy," she said.

This is Raines' 30th year of teaching Spanish at Heights, and she has done the pinata activity every year. She said the population of the school has definitely changed in that time.

"When we first started, just being a Spanish teacher, we did it just to kind of introduce the Hispanic culture," she said. "As our population has changed in our schools over the years, it's been embraced more and more because the kids have more of that connection with the Hispanic culture."

Raines added the breaking of the pinata typically comes with the singing of a song, and in some years, the 2nd graders burst into the song upon shattering the object.

"In fact, our second graders sang that pinata song at their Christmas concert this year," she said. "That was before we even did the pinata. That was just something the music teacher had them do. It all just blends together, which is kind of fun."

Raines said all of this has one aim in mind with students.

"My goal is to kind of teach about the culture of the Spanish speaking countries," she said.

American and Hispanic Christmases are somewhat similar, according to Raines, but the latter has a heavier emphasis on the traditions of the Roman Catholic church.

"The Hispanic population is typically heavily Roman Catholic, and so for that reason, Christmas is a big holiday among the Hispanic culture," she said. "The whole basic idea of Christmas is still the same – celebrating the birth of Christ, but the way it manifests itself is different."

In the U.S., children typically have many customs tied to Santa Claus, which Raines said the Hispanic culture is not geared toward traditionally.

"They're becoming more that way because our cultures are blending more, but typically, with the Hispanic culture if you go back in history not too far, some Mexican children wouldn't even

know what Santa Claus was," she said. "Their holiday would have more of a religious feel to it that we've unfortunately gotten away from in the United States."

The Mexican culture also has a tradition called "Las Posadas," a custom Raines said is similar to Christmas caroling.

"The Mexican culture will do something called las posadas," she said. "Las posadas are like a procession from one house to another. You have two people in the group, typically, a little boy and a little girl who play the part of Mary and Joseph and people following them along."

In this practice, Mary and Joseph travel from house to house asking for shelter in a manner similar to the biblical story of the birth of Christ.

"The tradition is for the people at the houses to say, 'No, there is no shelter here,'" she said. "Refuse them like Mary and Joseph were refused until they get to the end of the path where they're welcomed with open arms and they come in and have refreshments and fellowship."