

Las Vegas Sun

This camp receives stamp of approval from children

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Eleven-year-old Las Vegas David Davenport has been collecting stamps only a short time, but he has his finger on the pulse of why the venerable hobby is failing to attract many of today's youngsters.

"If some country just started putting out stamps with Pokemon characters on them, then every kid would collect stamps," said David, who along with his 13-year-old brother, Jamie, and 7-year-old sister, Debrianna, collects stamps.

Cheryl Edgcomb, postmaster of the Knoxville, Pa., post office for the last 20 years and a strong advocate of youth stamp collecting, says adult attitudes toward youth collectors have to change.

"We as adults have not done a good job getting children interested in stamp collecting because the emphasis has for too long been trying to get kids to collect what we find interesting, not what they find interesting," she said.

"Too often a child's introduction to stamp collecting is grandpa taking out his big album and making the child sit for hours looking through it, getting bored and deciding not to take up the hobby."

Edgcomb, the national coordinator for the Stamp Camp USA program, is on a crusade to reverse a trend that has put the once popular kids' pastime on shaky ground amid stiff competition from Pokemon, video games and computers.

She is hosting the first Stamp Camp USA-Las Vegas Aug. 19-22 at the MGM Grand in conjunction with the National Association of Postmasters of the United States convention.

Because a number of conventioners enrolled their children in the stamp camp, there were fewer spaces for locals -- and some of those were quickly filled by David, his brother and sister and others, Edgcomb said.

As a result, Edgcomb is putting together a second Stamp Camp USA-Las Vegas. Thirty children signed up for the upcoming camp. No limit on the number of participants has been set for the second local camp. No date has been set either.

"Kids today collect mostly topicals like stamps that feature trains, flowers, baseball players -- things they are interested in," Edgcomb said. "That is what Stamp Camp USA encourages."

David and his brother, who both attend Molasky Middle School, collect stamps that feature space travel and trains. David also collects stamps that depict penguins, monkeys and Dalmatians, while Jamie also collects stamps that commemorate the Olympic Games and boats.

Debrianna, a second grader at Eisenburg Elementary, collects stamps that show butterflies, hearts and flowers. She said she became interested in butterflies while on a family trip to a butterfly museum in Oregon and was surprised to learn that stamps from many countries depict the delicate creatures.

"Dad got us interested in stamp collecting while we were collecting Pokemon cards," Jamie said.

His father, postal employee Terry Fleshman, is a longtime member of the Las Vegas Stamp Club and a collector of Ireland stamps. His wife, Debbie collects, stamps from Lebanon and owl topicals.

"It's a great hobby that keeps the children busy, and it also is good fun for the entire family," Debbie Fleshman said. "But what I like most about it is that it is educational. The kids ask questions about the stamps and the countries they come from, and they learn more about those far away places."

When the opportunity came to send the children to Stamp Camp USA-Las Vegas, Debbie thought it would be a great way to broaden her children's knowledge of the hobby and have a great time -- all for a registration fee of just \$5 a child.

The Davenport kids say stamp collecting "is real cool," but they lament that none of their friends collect stamps, so they have no one to trade with. They rely on money they earn doing chores and on cash awards they have won from the local stamp club to buy stamps to build their collections.

Ruth Hilliard, longtime operator of Charleston Stamps on West Charleston Boulevard, says the hobby needs new blood. She estimates that less than 5 percent of her customers are children.

"The issuing of cartoon character stamps (by the Postal Service) and Disney stamps (from countries around the world) have helped a lot, but the stamp collector will be a dying breed without the kids getting more involved," she said.

Hilliard agreed that kids are encouraged to collect topical stamps rather than the traditional U.S. and world year-by-year issues because of today's tremendous volume of material.

"More than 10,000 new postage stamps are issued worldwide each year," Hilliard said. "That's why starter kits for kids are small. We don't want them to get overwhelmed and give up."

Stamp Camp USA started in 1996 in Tioga County, Pa., as an educational program of the Northern Tioga School District. It soon won the support of the Postal Service and the American Philatelic Society.

The first national camp was held in August 2001 in New Orleans. Stamp Camp USA has been booked as part of the World Expo 2006 International Philatelic Exhibition in Washington.

Edgcomb said running the camp has been a learning experience, noting that kids are more interested in the enjoyment value of collecting stamps than they are in any potential monetary value.

"We rarely talk about the market value of stamps or what their collections are worth but rather encourage stamp collecting as a means of fun and education," Edgcomb said.

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