First lady thrills BR students

By AMY WOLD

A timid chorus of "Hello Mrs. Bush," from Kira Orange-Jones' fourth-grade class marked the beginning of the first lady's visit Friday to Eden Park Elementary School in Baton Rouge.

It was the final stop in a weeklong tour of five schools across the nation to promote Teach for America Week. Teach for America recruits recent college graduates to commit to two years teaching in an urban or rural school. Orange-Jones is in her second year of the program.

"I want everyone in America to know how important teaching is," Bush told the class. Bush talked from experience, having been an elementary school teacher and librarian.

In her 30-minute visit, Bush gave a short lesson about cherishing the country's diversity. The students, who seemed unconcerned about the group of about 20 media representatives with video equipment and cameras in the back of the room, became shy and nervous when questioned.

"Can you find our country on this map? What is our country?" Bush asked.

"Baton Rouge," the class blurted out and then several giggled when they realized what they had said.

In preparation for a book she read, "Faraway Home," by Jane Kurtz, Bush had each child find Ethiopia on a map. In the book, a child learns about her father's homeland of Ethiopia.

"I chose this book to talk about how our country is filled with people from all over the world," Bush said.

In addition to giving the class a book about beautiful places in America, she also gave them a packet of photos and information about the White House and Washington, D.C., and fielded questions.

For the fourth-graders, the most pressing questions involved the first family's pets, the White House and Bush's twin daughters, Barbara and Jenna.

Janice Grimes, 10, pointed to one of the packet's photographs and asked where it was taken.

"That's the movie theater. There's a movie theater in the White House," Bush said. Grimes raised her eyebrows in surprise, but accepted the answer.

Deshawn Washington, 10, wanted to know why there were pictures of the two family dogs but none of the cat.

"Do you have a golf course at your house?" Matthew Anderson, 10, said.

No, but there is a putting green, Bush answered.

After Bush left the classroom, teacher Orange-Jones looked at her class and told everyone to take a deep breath.

"I've never seen you so quiet," Orange-Jones said. "Raise your hands if you were scared."

Almost everyone raised their hands.

"Who wants to be president one day so you can live in that house?" Orange-Jones asked. Again, every hand was in the air.

Although the children knew there was going to be a special guest Friday, they didn't know who until 8 a.m.

"We had made predictions earlier in the week," Orange-Jones said.

The guesses ranged from a guest appearance by Orange-Jones' mom to a famous rapper — children had seen U.S. Secret Service agents earlier in the week and mistook their earpieces for rap artists' equipment.

Orange-Jones said when she told the students who their guest was, they gasped.

"It's a once in a lifetime opportunity for them," Orange-Jones said. "Just to see the first lady come here and find it relevant to talk to them. It makes them feel important. Now, they want to go to the White House."

For security purposes, only the principal and the teacher involved knew about the visit until after Bush had left.

Principal Vera Dunbar said she was told Monday.

"It's been a good day," she said.