Ashley Burgess, left, and Jared Anslum, front right, practice one of the native Chitimacha dances their group will perform at the Goodwill Games in Russia.

Chitimacha dancers to take goodwill to games

By KRIS WARTELLE
Special to The Advocate

CHARENTON—If Acadiana television viewers listen closely to the opening ceremonies of the Goodwill Games, they may recognize the familiar drumbeat of the Chitimacha tribe.

The Goodwill Games in St. Petersburg, Russia, will feature a group of youths belonging to the tribe as they show off some of their native dancing talents.

Opening ceremonies take place Sunday and will be broadcast on Turner Network Television. The games will also be broadcast weekdays on the ABC network.

The Teche Spirit Dancers, a group of about 12 dancers ranging in age from 11 to 15 years, will be making the trip all the way from their home on the Chitimacha Indian Reservation to Russia, to dance traditional tribal dances.

“The kids are nervous but they are very excited,” cultural director Carolyn Savage says.

Savage says they have been practicing day and night for the event, which millions of people will see.

“Seventy thousand people will be in the audience for the opening ceremonies,” Savage says. “The kids will be very busy from the time we arrive until the time we leave.”

The group of eight girls and four boys will perform the dances that usually are done only during special tribal ceremonies, not in front of the public. They plan to do the northern shawl dance, the war dance, the grand entry dance and the canoe dance.

The drumbeat is the focus of a tribal dance, and when the drumbeat stops, a good dancer knows to stop, she says.

Eleven-year-old Zachary LeBlanc is excited about the trip.

“Everybody was yelling and stuff when we heard,” she says. “We’ve been practicing every day.”

LeBlanc says when she gets to Russia she wants to “tour everywhere.” She says she wants to see and do everything.

Meanwhile, 12-year-old Jessica Deslatte says she is glad the group was invited to participate.

“I’m nervous about going to Russia,” she says, “Because I don’t know if I’ll like it there.”

Deslatte says she can’t wait to “see what they eat over there.”

Savage says she received a letter inviting the group to the games. At the time, she thought it was a joke and was very surprised.

The youths had only been dancing for a short time and most of their performances were local.

But an official in Washington, D.C., remembered them and included the group in the games.

The group has been holding fund-raisers because the trip will cost about $3,700 for each person. The group also has been relying on help from the tribe to raise the needed money.

“It’s a lot of money,” Savage says. “But it’s a chance of a lifetime.”

Savage says the kids also will perform in Finland and Sweden during the trip.

No other Native American tribes will make that part of the trip, so the Chitimacha dancers will represent the entire country when they go, she says.