

'Roots of Mexico' danced with youthful enthusiasm

By John Flinn
Examiner staff writer

EAST PALO ALTO — Eleven-year-old Ana Maria Zuniga twirled her skirt as she and her partner danced around the giant sombrero on the floor.

"Before I started dancing I used to spend all my spare time watching TV," she said. "It was real boring."

Zuniga is one of about 30 East Palo Alto youths learning traditional Mexican folk dances through a 4-year-old program called "Raices de Mexico," which translates into "Roots of Mexico."

The dancers, many of them children of Mexican immigrants, have performed at Cinco de Mayo festivals throughout the Bay Area, and at the Greek Theater in Berkeley and the San Mateo County Fairgrounds.

They spend five hours a week practicing at the St. Francis of Assisi Church in East Palo Alto and countless other hours working on their costumes.

"This keeps the traditions alive, but it also does a lot for the kids," said Ruben Avelar, the group's founder.

"There's nothing else in the community for them to do," said Avelar, 26. "Kids drop out of school and terminate their journey in life."

Practices and performances help the youths gain self-confidence, he said.

"We see a lot of the kids with a new sense of pride," Avelar said. "We

see introverts and bumblers blossom as they perform in public. It's an excellent character builder."

The group began four years ago when Avelar was asked to prepare a Cinco de Mayo presentation for Ravenswood Middle School, where he was teaching.

While growing up, he had learned traditional Mexican dances through Los Lupenos, a San Jose dancing group, so he asked friends in the group to help him pass on the dances to his students.

The new dance group proved so popular that Avelar had trouble accommodating everyone who was interested.

"I decided to expand the dancing to the community," said Avelar, who grew up in East Palo Alto. "It was my way to get involved. I thought about politics, but that doesn't really help the kids."

Avelar teaches two groups each week, one ranging in age from 4 to 12 and the other from 13 to 20.

They learn dances from three regions of Mexico: the romantic Jalisco region; Norte, the northern border states, with their European influence; and Veracruz, the southern seaport with its Spanish flavor.

"Every dance has a history, and we try to teach it to the kids," Avelar said.

Avelar's group has gone beyond dancing. It helps out in church classes and spends hours cleaning up the park behind the church.



Examiner/Kim Komenich
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