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Roots of a culture

Raices de Mexico celebrates 20 years of dance

by Sarah Heim

Back in 1984, Maria Elena Varela and her family couldn't help but overhear the upbeat, foot-stomping gaiety inside St. Francis of Assisi Church in East Palo Alto. Following the sounds of the infectious music, they went inside, started to dance and haven't stopped since.

The Varela family discovered Raices de Mexico (Roots of Mexico), a nonprofit Mexican folklore dance company established in 1980 by East Palo Alto native Ruben Avelar.

The company will celebrate its 20th anniversary on Saturday with a special performance at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. Entitled "A Journey Through Mexico," the event will feature a compilation of music and dance from 10 regions, including Aguascalientes, in central Mexico north of Guadalajara. Attendees will tap their feet to the sound of three live bands: Mariachi Santa Cecilia, Cascada de Flores and Cuarteto Pacheco. The former will feature heavily violin and guitar-based Huasteca music (sung by falsettoed male singers, the songs chronicle romance and tragedy), while the latter will pipe in the more upbeat, country-music style sounds of northern Mexico.

"I saw a void in the community after I graduated from college," said Avelar, who attended UC Berkeley. "I remembered that my mother used to make me dance when I was a kid. The dances were rich in tradition and symbolism. They blended the passion of the culture and history of Mexico with regionalized music."

Raices de Mexico became Avelar's way of giving back to the East Palo Alto community.

"In the beginning, it was very home-grown and family-oriented," Avelar said. "We were helping kids develop coordination, rhythm, confidence and most importantly, friendship."

Five families participated in Raices de Mexico in its first year.

Last year, nearly 30 people took classes from two instructors at the Cubberley Community Center-based school. Saturday's performance will bring together both current students as well as alumni.

"A lot of the kids turned out to be high achievers," said Varela, whose three daughters have participated in the group off and on for the last 20 years. "Many have gone on to college. It's helped build self-esteem. These kids were able to get up in front of 100 people and perform."

In class, children are taught the history and culture of the dances they are learning, Avelar said. There are 32 states in Mexico and within each state there are separate regions, with each having their own unique, indigenous music and dance.

In 1986, Raices de Mexico extended their class offerings to include adults. Paloma Garcia-Lopez, who has been involved with the group for three years, said the adult members still talk about the cultures informally while they're learning the regional dances. "Sometimes someone will be from one of the places, or know someone from there," she said. "We share stories."

Although most of the members are of Mexican decent, Raices de Mexico is open to anyone with an interest in folk dance and Mexican culture. And according to Avelar, there have always been people of different nationalities participating.

"Our mission is to preserve and promote our diverse culture," said Varela, who in recent years has spent more time shuffling papers for the group than she has spent shuffling her feet.

As is the case with many nonprofits, Raices de Mexico struggles to stay afloat financially. However, with recent funding from the Palo Alto Weekly Holiday Fund, Palo Alto Endowment Fund and Washington Mutual Bank, the group will be able to offer aid for students in upcoming months.

Finding a place to conduct the weekly classes for children and adults has also been difficult. The group has been hard pressed to find a permanent home ever since the spacious, rent-free dance studio at the former Ravenswood High School was torn down in 1994.

Despite the setbacks, the dancing hasn't slowed. Instructors continue to acquire new regional skills at annual dance conferences held in Mexico.

"The instructors will go to the conferences, learn the new dances and bring back a copy of the dress," said Leticia Madrigal,

another member of the group who recently moved to Los Angeles, but has been commuting up to East Palo Alto to practice for the 20th anniversary performance this Saturday.

The flamboyant and colorful costumes are an integral part of the dance performance. Instructors and group members will often have to scavenge through import shops to find the right materials.

"Sometimes we have to improvise," Madrigal said with a smile.

Still, despite financial constraints over the years, Raices de Mexico has survived and continues to thrive.

"All I did was plant the seed," said Avelar, who left the group in 1989 to pursue other interests, like family and his full-time job. "I never would have believed it would have gone this far."

What: "A Journey Through Mexico," presented by Raices de Mexico in honor of its 20th anniversary.

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St. (corner of Castro and Mercy), Mountain View

Cost: Admission is \$18 adults; \$13 for children under 12 and seniors. Tickets can be purchased at the door or by calling (650) 903-6565.

Info: Call (650) 322-1501 for more information on dance classes.



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