

Palo Alto

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INSIDE
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A Mexican sensation

A look at the swirling colors and foot-stomping gaiety of Raices de Mexico.

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Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to theater, art, movies and more, edited by Monica Hayde



Saray Palacios and Omar Gutierrez

A Mexican sensati

*While Raices de Mexico looks
for a new home, the dance troupe
continues to entertain*

by Monica Hayde

photographs by Margaret Kaye

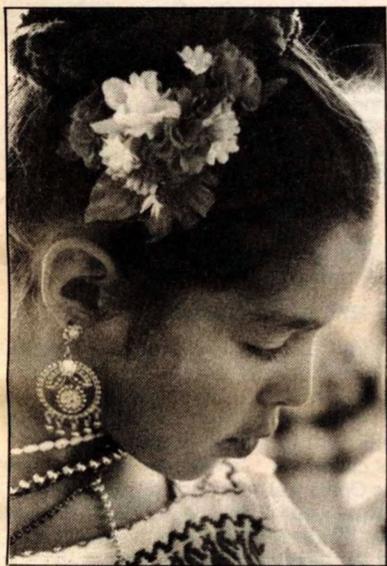


Noel Ramirez and Erika Guerrero



Audrey Masterson, age 8, dances in a swirl of color during the opening ceremonies for the Cesar Chavez Academy in East Palo Alto.

On



Erika Guerrero, age 9



Noel Ramirez, 12, has been a member of Raices de Mexico since 1988.

With just a touch of creative embellishment, a television network could take the story of Raices de Mexico and turn it into a pretty darn inspiring after-school special.

All the elements are there. A humble beginning. Dedication. Financial woes. Knock-'em-dead dance performances.

For 14 years, Raices de Mexico has brought all the swirling colors, pageantry and foot-stomping gaiety of Mexico's diverse folk dances to Midpeninsula audiences. The East Palo Alto-based, non-profit ensemble of 15 adults and 12 children was founded in 1980 by East Palo Alto resident and community activist Ruben Avelar. The troupe offers a visual palette of Mexico's diversity: the cheerful, colorful dances from Jalisco, the indigenous dances of Michoacan, the cowboy-like steps and music of Durango, Eastern European-influenced polkas that hail from the north of the country.

Raices de Mexico takes its colorful dances and flamboyant, handmade costumes to parades, fund-raisers and community celebration from San Francisco to

Gilroy. After the Mexico City earthquake in 1985, Raices hosted two fund-raisers and collected almost \$1,000 to donate to the Red Cross for use in the relief effort in Mexico. Most recently, the children danced at the opening ceremonies of the Cesar Chavez Academy in East Palo Alto. Now the adults are preparing for an April 23 performance at the Fox Theatre in Redwood City.



Victoria Johnson, 14; Audrey Masterson, 8 and Nicole Varela, 13

Although the majority of members are from Mexico, Raices de Mexico (Roots of Mexico) is open to anyone with an interest in indigenous, Spanish-influenced and contemporary Mexican folk dances. The adult group includes a Japanese-American woman, and the children's ensemble has several young natives of El Salvador. Members pay \$25 per month in tuition fees.

"Our members are very dedicated to what they do," says Javier Pacheco, a member of the board of directors. "Some people have been with us for five or six years, and it isn't always easy for them. Funds are tight. And \$25 a month can be a lot for some of them. We have several single mothers in the group."

A grant from the California Arts Council allows the board to pay a small salary to the adults' instructor. And since 1988, the city of East Palo Alto has allowed Raices to use, rent-free, the spacious dance studio at the former Ravenswood High School.

However, the impending destruction of Ravenswood to make way for the planned Gateway 101 shopping center has the members of Raices worried about the future.

"We are sad about it, but we will persevere," says Pacheco. It won't be the first time Raices has been without a permanent home. For several years, the group made do with a makeshift studio above a Mexican restaurant in Redwood City. Later, they used multipurpose rooms in various churches.

"This space at Ravenswood has been like a dream," Pacheco says. "We have looked at a few other options, but we are not sure yet what we will do."

One possibility would be studio space at Menlo-Atherton High School, Pacheco adds. "It would really be a shame to leave East Palo Alto, though. I can't stress enough how good the city has been to us in letting us have this space, and we think our organization is a good, positive addition to the city."

While the search for a home goes on, the members of Raices continue to practice twice a week in preparation for upcoming performances, perhaps a gig at the Cubberley Community Center in the spring.

"We are not the only group that does Mexican dances, so we have to be the best," sums up longtime member Luis Cel.

For more information about Raices de Mexico, call 322-1501. ■