

July 9, 1993

## History

In 1980 an ambitious Poli Sci graduate from Berkeley, Ruben Avelar decided he wanted to do something significant for the East Palo Alto community where he lived. He wanted to keep alive his Mexican ancestral roots by teaching folkloric dance to the Latino youth of the community. Ruben grew up in an area that was once predominantly black. All government seats and services were geared to this reality and consequently, when demographic growth patterns changed the face of EPA, local government was caught off guard (from the 1990 Census: Latinos comprise 34% of the EPA population). He set up classes for youngsters of all ages. A student of Susan Cashion (founder of San Jose's Los Lupeños and today, Chair of the Dance Department, Stanford University) Ruben was the first instructor/choreographer, teaching students basic steps from the major regions of Veracruz, Jalisco, and North Mexico. By the time Ruben turned administration of the group over to alumni María Elena Pacheco Varela (1987), Raices was providing instruction to intermediate children, teenagers, and adults, including a beginners' class. Their repertoire then included Michoacan, Tamaulipas, and more advanced dances from the other areas cited. Few then would have imagined that the group would continue to thrive and attract new audiences.

Today, Raíces de México (Roots of Mexico) is a survivor. We have withstood the test of time--we are a tax deductible, non-profit organization. Our performances keep improving and our dancers keep evolving, many remaining with the us several years. In its thirteenth year of operation, Raices has had many changes, mostly positive. And we have managed without major support or funding. But this has limited our growth as a serious organization. Instructor salaries have come from student registration dues and performance revenues. We continue enhancing the community with quality shows for the whole family. We have performed for seniors, war veterans, children of all ages, and a number of multicultural groups. The Group has participated in fundraisers (including Earthquake Relief, for victims of the 1985 Mexico City quake), community celebrations, parades (i.e., Fourth of July Parades in Redwood City), grand openings (i.e., inauguration of the new Redwood City Library) and school activities throughout the MidPeninsula. We have gone from being a local seasoned dance troupe to a serious cultural organization, teaching its members (besides dance and music) practical, marketable skills. This includes leadership that comes from an awareness of Latino advocacy issues in an area where Latinos have had little voice or participation. We have had to enter into these other realms largely out of default--Raices de Mexico is the only Mexican non-profit performing arts organization in San Mateo County. We know that to continue into our second decade we need to be stronger organizationally.

The City of East Palo Alto, which became incorporated as a city fairly recently, has not been able to help us much monetarily, but they have been of enormous assistance to us. Thanks to the (in-kind) generosity of the City of East Palo Alto, Raices de Mexico (RM) has had a permanent site to conduct its classes, at the old Ravenswood High School Dance Studio. Without a steady facility to operate RM would have probably died an early death. The studio has given us tremendous visibility and consistency. But the property where Ravenswood High stands has been sold by the City and most of the school will be razed within the year. This month, City of East Palo Alto Mayor Sharifa Wilson has assured us that the Studio will be the last building scheduled for demolition. This means we will have about another year and a half of Studio use and then we will truly be on our own.

The bad news about the loss of the studio is possibly good news in disguise. The time has come for us to take bold steps. We realize that we have to either become stronger as an organization or wither away like other short-lived, poor non-profits. Our students are mostly Spanish-speaking and working class, including some who are professional, white-collar, and middle-class. We have many single mothers and their children in the group. The Board of Directors (see enclosure) are parents, local residents and members of surrounding communities who encourage the dancers, provide transportation and assist in all group activities. Members plan and participate in group activities such as potlucks, holiday parties, trips to the waterslides and conferences. Our overall objective is to sustain an organization that its members can operate. We have begun our fund-raising campaign this year with the goal of establishing salaries for the instructors and part-time office staff. We need a public relations and a development person. We must prepare ourselves administratively. For the past seven years, M.E. Varela has been our gracious in-kind administrator, volunteering over 15 hours a week--a task she has had to balance with raising three girls--she is overdue to step down. We need to prepare for the closure of the Ravenswood Studio not just by securing another rehearsal space. We need to evolve into a more professional performing arts organization. We need to train our members on how to run a non-profit corporation so that they can help us to become more self-sufficient.

By stabilizing instructors' salaries we can turn over performance fees to the students. This automatically makes them partners of the association. They will have a real stake in the growth of the organization. They will also gain in the experience of balancing budgets and general operational procedures. Our long-range goals include expanding the repertoire to include modern as well as traditional dance, organizing tours for the group in other states, possibly other countries, hiring music and arts teachers, working closer with the schools to provide bilingual instruction in the arts to Spanish-speaking children, producing educational videos on Mexican culture, nurturing a for-profit corporation that produce our shows, Orale Productions, and training other performing arts hopefuls in arts administration.

Raices de Mexico is a great investment in the future. We are an organization committed to high levels of professionalism that wishes to enhance Bay Area culture, offering positive alternatives to our youth.