



Cultural Connection

By Jennifer Kaplan

Latin dance clubs help kids find roots, discover traditions

"One. Two. Three. And five. Six. Seven. *Uno. Dos. Tres. Y cinco. Seis. Siete.*"

On the auditorium stage at Cardozo High School (officially Francis L. Cardozo Education Campus) in Washington, DC, Nelson Ortiz, 21, calls out salsa counts in Spanglish. The dozen teenagers he's coaching are participants in the After School Latin Dance Program, a public-private partnership that brings Latin dance lessons to six District of Columbia Public Schools and 10 public schools in the Maryland suburbs of Montgomery County. Held

weekly, the classes run during the spring semester.

Some of the students step quickly, their hips swaying with ease; others are visibly counting; one or two trip over their toes. Two kids in the back, newbies to the group, are on either side of another teacher, Gabriela Ochoa, holding her hands. Wearing skinny jeans and red high-heeled salsa shoes, Ochoa breaks down the counts and steps even further, in half time.

The brainchild of longtime DC-area resident Ricardo Loaiza, a Colombia native, the program aims

Photo courtesy Washington Performing Arts



The After School Latin Dance Program clubs convene for an annual all-county dance competition. OPPOSITE: ASLDP alum Gabriela Ochoa now teaches students in three primary Latin dances—bachata, salsa, and merengue.

to provide a healthy alternative for students who might not find sports, clubs, or other afterschool activities fulfilling. But equally as important to Loaiza is bringing students who are immigrants or children of immigrants closer to their Latin cultural roots and sharing the beauty and richness of Latin dance forms with students of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

For Loaiza, Latin dance is personal. He taught it for more than two decades at various venues around Washington, DC, including four years at Joy of Motion Dance Center,

and met his wife, Elba Garcia, while dancing. He believes that dance opportunities in the high school setting provide not only physical and social outlets for kids, but also a terrific way to avoid or settle conflicts. He jokes: “Every time my wife and I want to resolve a conflict, we go out dancing.” He hopes those who join the ASLDP will do the same.

For years, ASLDP was a one-man show: Loaiza, an independent insurance agent, who previously worked at the World Bank and the Organization of American States, started the pro-

gram 14 years ago as a volunteer in a high school in northern Montgomery County, Maryland, where a growing first- and second-generation Hispanic population was settling. As more schools found in-school sponsors and interested students signed on, Loaiza incorporated the program as a not-for-profit in 2007.

Now, like football and volleyball teams, the Latin dance clubs convene for an annual all-county dance competition. The Montgomery County program culminates in a competition featuring all 10 Latin dance teams;



The After School Latin Dance Program is the brainchild of Ricardo Loiza (center), a Colombia native. (Back row, left and center: instructors Nelson Ortiz and Gabriela Ochoa.)

they perform before a panel of judges—local celebrities and Latin dance pros—at one of the region’s premiere performing-arts facilities, the Music Center at Strathmore in Bethesda. The much younger DC program is in its third season, with six middle and high school groups. They competed in Cardozo High’s recently renovated auditorium, in the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood, with a gorgeous view of the Capitol building in the distance.

“[The program is] a safe space where students of all backgrounds can explore new ideas and learn

about the Latin heritage,” says Michelle Hoffmann, director of education at Washington Performing Arts, a longtime arts presenter and supporter of arts-education programs. “We’ve created an environment of inclusivity, hoping that they’ll like it and stick with it.”

Washington Performing Arts signed on to co-sponsor the inner-city District of Columbia program, providing funding that covers instructors’ fees, transportation, supplies, and documentation costs. During the summer, the DC government provides

funds, through its Summer Youth Employment Program, for a shortened session in the Anacostia neighborhood, which is primarily African American rather than Hispanic. Loiza hopes this crossover cultural experience will build bridges between two ethnic communities.

These days, Loiza focuses far less on teaching. He hands off that responsibility to program alums like Ochoa and Ortiz so that he can devote his time to administering and raising funds to support and expand the programs he has developed.

“The club became a way for me to maintain my culture and my mom and dad’s culture. I took Spanish in school and traveled to El Salvador in 2012, but dance brought back the language to me.” —Gabriela Ochoa



The ASLDP at Cardozo High provides a healthy alternative for students who might not find other afterschool activities fulfilling.

Photos courtesy Washington Performing Arts



Students compete in six categories, including a Jack and Jill, in which partners are determined on competition day.

She says that because so many participants are recent immigrants—and not only from Latin America; two Ethiopian students joined this past spring—grades are not yet a factor. But attendance, good behavior, and avid participation are.

As the faculty sponsor (a volunteer role), Critchfield is the conduit to working within school parameters: reserving the room, keeping an attendance log, and setting standards for responsible behavior as part of a team. She hopes to build on what has been started—organizationally, technically, artistically, and socially—for the coming school year; in the meantime she already has seen small successes. One student who had behavior problems and spoke no English overcame those challenges, eventually representing the team in

the three dances, a Jack and Jill (partners are determined on competition day, across teams), a parent-student category, and a splashy group piece. Although most of the participants are of Hispanic origin, not everyone is; therefore, instruction is in both English and Spanish. Both Ochoa and Ortiz had to improve their Spanish in order to teach effectively. Ortiz, born in El Salvador, grew up in the United States, speaking English, Spanish, and a combination of the two at home.

A lot of the kids think they know how to dance, Loaiza says, but once they realize what it means to lead and follow, and how to count rhythms and syncopate the steps (for example, in bachata and salsa), they realize they have much to learn and plenty to practice. They also learn that students from Puerto Rico, for example, dance differently than those from Mexico or El Salvador. Some cultures dance mambo on the two-count and others stylize the dance by accenting the one count.

Loaiza faces changing traditions. Recently two boys wanted to partner,

The Montgomery County school system enforces academic standards, requiring students to maintain at least a 2.5 GPA in order to participate and compete; however, in the District, the rules are less stringent. At Cardozo, a quarter of the nearly 700 students are learners of English as a second language and 99 percent of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunches. Lucinda Critchfield, an ASLDP faculty sponsor at Cardozo, says many students are recent arrivals in the U.S. who speak and understand little or no English.

Critchfield, who has taught ESL for 22 years at Cardozo, says the dance program provides another anchor for students, beyond academics and other afterschool activities, especially those who are new not only to the school but also to American culture.

Loaiza believes that dance opportunities in the high school setting provide not only physical and social outlets for kids, but also a terrific way to avoid or settle conflicts.

the individual salsa competition. The 17-year-old ninth-grader had been in the country only about nine months and worked evenings as a janitor; now, Critchfield says, he has taken a leadership role in the group.

Loaiza has created a loose curriculum to introduce three primary Latin dances—bachata, salsa, and merengue—in each school's club. The students compete in six categories:

which was unheard of in their parents' generation—but it made Loaiza reconsider the way his teachers referred to partners. Now rather than "boy" and "girl," they say "lead" and "follow." "We are an open culture now," Loaiza says. "We're slowly breaking into new territory. Some parents are progressive and love it. Others have a hard time with it."

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The dances, of course, feature plenty of hips, shoulders, and suggestive moves. But in the club, partners are encouraged to keep a respectful distance, learn and practice appropriate etiquette, and not push beyond “a PG-13 rating,” as Loaiza says, when dancing.

Ochoa, 21, followed her older brother onto the Watkins Mill High School team when she was a ninth-grader. She studied other dance forms and was a cheerleader. But once she saw the team perform, she was hooked. Setting aside her other dance lessons, she focused on the Latin dance club. “I was born here [in Maryland], and both my parents came here [from El Salvador] at a young age, so I was pretty Americanized,” she says. “The club became a way for me to maintain my culture and my mom and dad’s culture. I took Spanish in school and traveled to El Salvador in 2012, but dance brought back the language to me.”

Now a full-time college student planning to major in hospitality management, Ochoa teaches in the ASLDP about 15 hours a week. She loves the fact that she meets students from all over the world; recently new members from Nepal, the Virgin Islands, and Egypt have joined various teams she helms with Ortiz.

“We learn about how different we are, depending on the culture, and how different cultures prefer different




ASLDP shares the beauty and richness of Latin dance forms with students of all backgrounds and ethnicities.

rhythms,” Ochoa says. “But we also learn how much we have in common. Because I’m pretty close to [the students] in age, I can understand them more, especially when morale falls and they need more support and encouragement.”

What’s most important when attempting to institute an afterschool program like ASLDP, Loaiza says, is to find funding first. Most schools are interested in expanding their afterschool offerings, but have very little funding to offer new programs like ASLDP. Critchfield receives no remuneration for her work, and Loaiza would like to see that change. He also encourages dance teachers to do research on what’s available in their area, to ensure that they don’t duplicate effort.

Finally, Loaiza says, these programs take dedication, time, and energy and offer minimal financial rewards. “When I started this,” he says, “I cut back on my insurance business and took a huge pay cut. My wife is my backbone, and her income allows me to continue building my passion.”

He does it, he says, because the kids keep coming: some return to teach in the program, others are new members who need the anchor the Latin dance club provides to keep them motivated in school. “Some graduates from early programs have entered or finished college already,” he says. “I don’t know that so many would have succeeded without the focus and discipline they learned through dance.” 



Enthusiasm, attendance, and good behavior are ASLDP member requirements.

Photos by Paul Emerson

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