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YOUTH: Teens take the stage for Latin Dance competition

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Tags: Chelsea Boone, Clarksburg High School, education, Einstein, Einstein High School, featured, Gaithersburg High School, high, High School, Jack Jill, Latin Dance, learning, life, Montgomery County, picturesAlbert Einstein, Ricardo Loaiza, Rockville High School, school, School Dance Fund, show, Silver Theatre

by Chelsea Boone

photos by Miguel Alvarez
Roaring screams filled the Strathmore in North Bethesda as the performers stepped on to the stage. All of their preparation led them to this moment: The chance to perform for a crowd of over 500 and compete for the title of the best in the county.

On Nov. 28 the After School Dance Fund presented the 12th annual Montgomery County Public Schools Latin Dance Competition, where seven local high schools competed in eight divisions including cha cha, merengue, bachata and salsa. The competition also consisted of an alumni division, a parent and child division, a Jack & Jill division where the participants partnered up with a dancer from another school and best in show.

In 1999 Seneca Valley High School wanted to perform for Hispanic Heritage Month, which eventually led to the competition, according to Ricardo Loaiza, a professional dancer, who helped the students with choreography for their performance.

He began reaching out to other nearby high schools and a competition began after two years, Loaiza said.

The dance clubs at the different schools are able to function thanks to “dedicated teachers that love the concept of helping the kids,” Loaiza said.

Loaiza credits Paula Pero from Albert Einstein High School and Vilma Najera from Clarksburg High School for organizing the competition. “They did all the leg work,” he said.

Over the years the competition grew to a point where parents and other family members had to be turned away, Loaiza said.
This motivated him to start the After School Dance Fund, of which he is the founder and executive
director, to raise funds to move the competition to the Strathmore, he said. Last year’s competition
was the first one held there.

Loaiza wants to increase the number of schools that participate in the competition each year, and
wants to establish a Latin dance club in each school in Montgomery County, he said.

The Latin dance clubs have had positive influences on the students members, Loaiza said.

“It’s kept them out of trouble because they get to stay in school in an after school program,” he said.

The students must keep a 2.0 grade point average to compete, which encourages students to do well in
school and help each other, Loaiza said.

The Latin dance club “helps them with their self-esteem,” he added, and “they feel like they belong.”
The Latin dance clubs are not limited to Hispanics.

“We have people from all walks of life that just want to learn how to dance and be part of a group,” Loaiza said.

In addition to learning how to dance, the students learn team building skills, leadership skills, conflict resolution and etiquette, Loaiza said.

“There are all aspects of life,” he said. The students in the dance clubs are “leading and striving to be better people.”

Last year a documentary was filmed giving a glimpse into the lives of the students as they prepared
for the 2010 competition.

The film, “The Road to Strathmore” premiered Nov. 20 at the AFI Silver Theatre and Cultural Center in Silver Spring.

The documentary shows how the students work and all of the responsibilities they have, Loaiza said.

This year students from Hubert Blake High School, Clarksburg High School, Albert Einstein High School, Gaithersburg High School, Rockville High School, Seneca Valley High School and Watkins Mill High School had the opportunity to perform at the Strathmore with hundreds of people cheering them on.

Throughout the two-hour competition the audience’s energy never waned, but instead increased as the time went on.

After each school had the opportunity to perform, students were awarded with prizes, starting with the leadership awards that were presented to one student at each school who had shown leadership qualities.

Then, first, second and third place trophies were awarded in each division, with Clarksburg High School taking home the best in show trophy, and the first ever people’s choice trophy.
Every student also received a medal for participating in the competition, Loaiza said.

Loaiza hopes that one day Latin dance will be a part of school curriculum under the arts or physical education, and for Latin dance clubs to receive school funding.

“We’ve been lobbying the board of education to make this a line item on their budget,” Loaiza said.

There is also hope to add a scholarship to next year’s prizes, Loaiza said.

The After School Dance Fund also established relationships with the Hispanic business conference and would like to identify leaders who will get paid internships within the Hispanic business community, he said.

“What better way of showing our pride through our cultural heritage and the arts, and at the same time knowing…that they have a job lined up after they graduate,” Loaiza said.

If you are unable to see the slide show, please visit: http://voice.smugmug.com/Events/Teens-Take-the-Stage-for-Latin
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