



A dancer thanks Paco following the performance.



Photography Steve Munding, courtesy Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklórico

Building Confidence, Character and Cultural Bridges

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

A dozen brightly dressed grade-school children cluster outside an open door leading into the Basalt Library. They're quiet, as is appropriate in a library, but the standing-room-only crowd inside is anything but.

A blare of trumpets followed by shouts and the rapid rat-a-tat-tat of booted feet rhythmically drumming out patterns on a specially built plywood stage tumble through the open doorway. A peek inside reveals six middle- and high-school-aged dancers who are whirling like white butterflies on a summer's day. Flourishing their fans and petticoats, they sweep the audience up in a wave of enthusiasm. They're the senior dancers of the Aspen-Santa Fe Ballet (ASFB) Folklórico, a dance ensemble that showcases the cultural dances of Mexico.

Many of the grade school dancers standing outside are Folklórico veterans. Juan Lemus, who is 8, has been dancing for four years - half of his young life. In marked contrast to the horseplay one often sees amongst grade-schoolers waiting at a classroom door, Juan and his ensemble evidence composure and self-discipline. They know not to upstage the performers on stage - and how to wow the crowd when it's their turn.

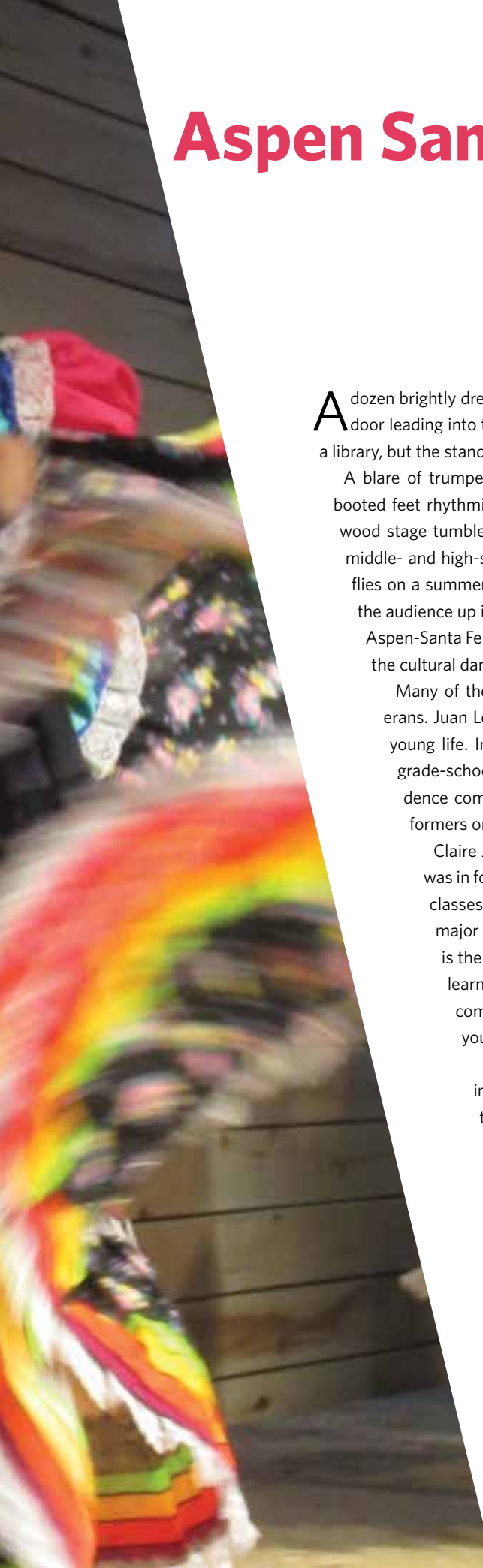
Claire Johnson, an alumna who began dancing with Folklórico when she was in fourth grade and continued into high school, commented, "Folklórico classes teach hard work, patience, endurance and seriousness. I think one major life lesson that most kids learn through Folklórico, myself included, is the self-confidence that comes from being a performer. As a dancer, one learns to be comfortable with one's self and one's abilities. Then when it comes to performance time, you give 100 percent to make yourself and your group proud."

The grade schoolers give it their all, performing 360-degree swirls, weaving through lines of other dancers and stamping out complex rhythms with their booted feet. Everyone stays on beat. No one forgets the pattern. They earn a rousing round of applause.

Their Basalt Library appearance marked the kickoff to Folklórico's 2015-16 school year and featured dancers from Ross Montessori, Glenwood Springs Elementary, Crystal River Elementary, St. Stephen's, the Basalt and Carbondale middle schools, Aspen High and Roaring Fork High, among others. The troupe performs frequently and is an integral part of local Day of the Dead celebrations.

Claire Johnson fondly recalls performing at local festivals and international competitions. She says, "One of my fondest memories was performing in my last end-of-the-year recital, in my senior year of high school. All the years I spent dancing came down to one final show that couldn't have been more perfect. I beamed with pride for what I had accomplished and with love for the friends who turned into family."

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Folklorico Director Francisco Nevarez-Burgueño, affectionately called "Paco," introduces each of dancers at the show's end and gets plenty of hugs. When he introduces Tavia Teitler, currently in her eleventh year and the company's senior dancer, she's beaming with the senior-year pride Johnson described. "The thing I enjoy most is to teach our young generations," says Nevarez-Burgueño. "To transmit our Mexican heritage, culture, dances and traditions and to see how much they enjoy dancing. I am so happy to see the pride they show in their faces at every single performance."

Nevarez-Burgueño understands young dancers because he was one. He joined the Compañia de Danza Folklorico in Chihuahua, Mexico, at the age of 12. Performing with Leonor Avalos for another 14 years, he learned a large repertoire of Mexican dances, as well as costume design, choreography, lighting and set design. In 1992, he founded the Mexico: Images and Traditions Folklorico Group in New York City, then served artistic director for Princeton University's Ballet Folklorico. He joined ASFB Folklorico in August 2002 and has taken the troupe to present at workshops in New York City, Chicago and Santa Fe. He has participated in conferences in Mexico and will be a guest speaker at an International Folk Festival in Costa Rica this year.

ASFB Folklorico, founded in 1998, offers after-school classes to more than 120 kids scattered from Rifle to Aspen, and about the same number in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The troupe seeks, as their website states, to "teach artistic excellence" and to "transcend cultural barriers through the art of dance." Judging from the camaraderie among parents and young dancers - who range from dark-eyed darlings chattering away in Spanish to the blue-eyed, blonde Tavia Teitler - the ensemble does those things well. And by drawing dancers from communities as disparate as Rifle and Aspen, it also crosses economic barriers.

Johnson says that's one of program's key lessons. "Folklorico taught me cultural awareness and accepting those that are different than me. I learned to believe in myself, to push through difficult situations and to be a role model for the little ones. It taught me to appreciate music, cultural history, rhythm, passion and pride for one's heritage. I owe a lot of who I am today to Folklorico."

Parents who enroll their children in Folklorico pay a \$25 registration fee and must buy dance shoes, but Aspen-Santa Fe Ballet provides the instruction, the tuition and the costumes - which are nothing short of spectacular - free of charge. After-school classes meet twice a week at the Red Brick Studio in Basalt, at Third Street Center in Carbondale, at Glenwood Springs Elementary School and in the Annex Gymnasium at Rifle Middle School.

During her time with the troupe, Johnson transitioned from student to teacher, working with Tavia Teitler to instruct kindergartners and beginners. "Teaching was surprisingly difficult," Johnson says. "I hadn't danced for about two years, so remembering moves to teach the kids, explaining them properly and keeping the kids focused was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be. I learned how much energy and patience Paco has to give every student, during every class period. I enjoyed watching that 'Eureka!' moment that happens when you are teaching someone a new move, when they suddenly do it correctly and feel so confident that they continue to perform it because they are so happy that they have it mastered it! I loved watching those moments with kids as young as five and six years old."

During Folklorico's Basalt performance, the ensemble performed dances from Colima, Baha, Sinaloa and Jalisco. Eighth-grader Shanik Zambrano, who has been dancing with the troupe for four years, says she knows about ten regional dances. Her favorites are "a very feminine dance from Vera Cruz" and a dance from Jalisco which she likes "because of the skirts".

Shanik's younger sister, second-grader Gianna, joined Folklorico after watching Shanik practice for a year. Gianna says that it's "not scary" on stage. She likes Folklorico because "it's fun to dance" and "it's a good experience to learn about our culture."

Grown-up Folklorico alumna Claire Johnson sums up the rewards this way: "I think one major life lesson that most kids learn through Folklorico, myself included, is the self-confidence that comes from being a performer. You learn teamwork and social skills as a member of a dance group that practices for hours upon hours each week. The experience can be difficult, but the reward of long lasting relationships and a community of dancers that are like family is amazing!"

ASFB Folklorico company, photo by Charles Engelbert, courtesy of Aspen-Santa Fe Ballet. Folklorico dancers often perform in Día de los Muertos celebrations.

Elementary school kids performing a dance from Baha.

Shanik Zambrano shows off her skirt.

Grade school dancers waiting at the Basalt Library door.