

# Program teaches low-income kids to dance

By Ed Fletcher Sunday, Aug. 9, 2009

(Photo right) Diana Duque, left, and JAH'Sol Amaru Porras practice dancing, along with Marien Lopez, in pink, and Carolyn Quinteros on Saturday at the Victory Townhomes community center in Sacramento. Thirteen youngsters took part in ballroom dance lessons in a program funded by a grant from Sierra Health Foundation's REACH Coalition.



MICHAEL ALLEN JONES

For 13 teens and pre-teens, Saturday morning in Sacramento offered a break from the routine: Out was television, playing in the yard and hanging out. In were the tango, merengue and quickstep.

The Sacramento Mutual Housing Association invited children living at three low-income housing complexes around Sacramento to a five-week introduction to ballroom dancing.

"T-A-N-G-O ... T-A-N-G-O." Pairs of children sounded it out as they slid their little feet.

At the end of each mini-lesson, instructor Camille Wojtasiak invited the kids to "Give yourself a hand" – which the kids did enthusiastically.

The program is one of several funded by a \$600,000 grant from Sierra Health Foundation's REACH Coalition. Awarded in 2006, the grant's first step was to analyze obstacles to success for children of low-income families, then to develop programs to overcome the challenges.

With dance, the idea is to get kids away from negative influences and give them something to feel proud of, organizers said.

"It's a time when they get warmth in a different kind of way," said Andrea Porras, community organizer for the housing association. "They definitely get something that is missing from the school system."

The grant also funded break-dance and hip-hop groups, and a Hmong dance group. Saturday, though, it was strictly ballroom.

After 10 minutes of tango, it was time

to switch to the cha-cha. The children lined up across the white and green spotted tile floor.

"Forward, back, cha-cha-cha. Forward, back, cha-cha-cha," they would chant, following the lead of Wojtasiak, a part-time competitive dancer and full-time banker.

Thanks to television shows like "Dancing With the Stars," "So You Think You Can Dance" and Spanish-language television's "Bailando por un Sueño," ballroom dancing has enjoyed a resurgence.

"There is a lot more interest in ballroom from younger people," Wojtasiak said.

Shows featuring celebrities as beginning dancers particularly demystify learning, she said. She and other instructors say that while the shows help, it's still difficult to get boys on the dance floor.

"There is always a shortage of boys," said Linda Infante, manager of The Ballroom of Sacramento. "Other boys think that if boys take dancing, it's sissy."

The boy shortage was evident Saturday at the Victory Townhomes recreation room.

Not that it would have mattered: Most of the time at least two of the four boys in the class would dance with each other – anything to avoid touching a girl.

The boys came voluntarily, but were quick to take a chair now and then, only to be coaxed or pulled back onto the floor. The girls never left the dance floor.

Several young boys from the apartment complex peered into the windows but

weren't ready to try on dancing shoes.

Porras vowed to try to get them out next week.

"If boys understood how much girls like to dance, more of them would learn to do so," Wojtasiak said.

After the hourlong lesson, the girls were ready to talk about it. The boys came along more slowly.

"I like to learn to dance. It's fun," said Carolyn Quinteros, 10.

Ruvit Lopez, 11, said her dad had already taught her some of the basics. Asked who was a better teacher, Wojtasiak or her dad, she answered, "Both."

"If they didn't have the dance class, we would not have learned," Lopez added.

Learning about art – in all its various forms – is important, Porras said.

"Art keeps us human," she said. "Art isn't only for people who can pay for these classes. I really feel it helps us grow."

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