

# Dancing his way from Mexico to the valley

*Intro: Francisco "Paco" Nevarez Burgueño is the director of the Folklorico Dance Program at the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Company. When he came to the program in 2002, he had 25 students. Today he teaches dance and culture to over 200.*

*In 2016, the state of Colorado recognized Francisco's work with the Governor's Creative Leadership Award for his cultural and artistic contributions to the Roaring Fork Valley and the state.*



Francisco "Paco" Nevarez Burgueño

**Burgueño:** In Mexico, everybody dances. It's part of the culture, it's part of life, day by day, week by week.

**Gallacher:** Did your parents influence you? Were they dancers?

**Burgueño:** No, but my mom is a great dancer. She is 80 years old, and she still dances with her cane. I remember my grandma, my grandpa, dancing. They were great dancers. When we went to weddings or quinceañeras [the celebration of a girl's 15th birthday], I remember them dancing.

**Gallacher:** So the folklorico dances really reflect life — romance, joy, tragedy and death?

**Burgueño:** Yes. Every single dance from Mexico has a meaning and tells a story. Many of the dances were influenced by the polkas that the early immigrants from Europe and Spain brought to the United States. Many of these immigrants settled in what is now Texas, New Mexico, Chihuahua, Arizona.

There were no real borders in those times, and the European immigrants and the Mexicans that lived there started sharing and adapting dances. So that was the influence in the northern part of Mexico.

But in the southern part, the traditions were heavily influenced by religions.

The folklorico dances that we teach today have been influenced by this history. There are dances for every occasion — quinceañeras, weddings, funerals. You can see the influence of the waltzes by Strauss but now it's a Mariachi, Norteña or Sinaloa band playing that sound. That's our daily tradition every single day or single week-end, and every single month is a festivity.

Many of our churches are named after a saint. Each of those saints has a special dance. Here in Carbondale it is Santa Maria La Corona (Saint Mary of the Crown). This church and all the churches in Mexico

that are named after this saint have a special dance created just for her.

**Gallacher:** So your culture is reflected through dance, just like with oral history. The dance is a way to preserve culture.

**Burgueño:** Yes. There are elements of our dances that reflect the dance traditions of the indigenous people who came before us.

**Gallacher:** So by the time you were in middle school, you understood the importance of folklorico dance to your culture?

**Burgueño:** Well, in the beginning when I was in elementary school, I was just a kid, learning like my students. They are like sponges right now, and they are learning a lot. I had a teacher who taught me dance and helped me understand the rich history of folklorico dance.

**Gallacher:** What was her name?

**Burgueño:** Leonor Avalos Saragosa. She was my dance mother. I learned the importance of discipline from her. A lot of families here say, "No, we don't want to put our kids in the Folklorico Dance Program because Paco is very strict and has a lot of discipline." But every single year there are more and more kids. When I moved here in 2002, there were 25 kids. Today, I have 200 students from Basalt to Rifle.

**Gallacher:** Why do you think the program is popular?

**Burgueño:** I think parents realize the importance of maintaining these traditions with their kids.

**Gallacher:** Many of your students face a lot of challenges in today's world. I imagine it is hard for some of them to leave their troubles at the door and focus on dance.

**Burgueño:** Yes, I remember when all the bad comments about Latinos started. I had

## IMMIGRANT STORIES

Immigrant Stories by Walter Gallacher appears on the fourth Tuesday of the month. Gallacher is a photojournalist and independent radio producer. Anyone with an immigrant story to tell about themselves or relatives is invited to email [wjgallacher@gmail.com](mailto:wjgallacher@gmail.com). To read past Immigrant Stories, go to [www.immigrantcolorado.blogspot.com](http://www.immigrantcolorado.blogspot.com).

to have conversations with the kids. I tried to reassure them and help them to not be afraid of what is happening and realize that we are all working together to overcome the prejudice and misunderstanding.

**Gallacher:** Well, dance in the climate that you just described can be therapeutic for kids.

**Burgueño:** Every day the kids come to dance, I tell them to leave everything outside, but I don't really have to tell them. When they come into the studio and they hear the music, they forget about everything else. They're transformed.

I always tell the parents, "Please leave your kids with me. Your kids are now my kids." The parents are very respectful of that. They see their kids become graceful dancers in the studio.

**Gallacher:** Why is discipline so important to you as a teacher?

**Burgueño:** It takes discipline to accomplish anything of value. My students need it for dance, for homework, for helping around the house, excelling at school, for life.

**Gallacher:** The Folklorico Dance

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## EXPANSION

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species.”

Wilderness Workshop also said the project must account for the effects of climate change, which Skico is rigorously fighting to limit in its political and social campaigns. Wilderness Workshop said Skico and the Forest Service must make sure that the Pandora plan won't harm wildlife as they seek high elevations on a warming planet.

“The [Aspen Skiing Co.] is actively being affected by climate change and is taking steps to adapt by expanding snowmaking and increasing higher elevation terrain on Aspen,” Wilderness Workshop's comments said. “Wildlife populations will also be impacted by climate change and specifically by increasing temperatures, shifting populations and habitats up in elevation.

“The Forest Service must disclose whether this project will negatively impact both current wildlife habitat as well as predicted future wildlife habitat which has shifted as a result of climate change,” the comment continued.

In a response to The Aspen Times, Skico said it is always examining climate-change

issues.

“Limiting our environmental impact while conducting business is always front of mind,” Skico said in a prepared statement. “In regards to snowmaking, the addition of on-mountain water storage will reduce our need to move water uphill. Coupled with a constant push to upgrade to the most energy-efficient equipment, we feel we can undertake this expansion and hold our energy consumption flat or even reduce it.”

Wilderness Workshop's concerns go beyond elk. It also wants the EA to look at potential impacts of development on other wildlife, including lynx and black bear. It raised numerous other issues in its comments, including potential effects of the development on air and water quality.

Regarding Wilderness Workshop's desire to see the expansion decoupled from other snowmaking, and its suggestion that a reduced alternative should be considered, Skico's statement said the forest supervisor has the ability to select and authorize or decline specific elements of the plan.

“The process allows for this and we are comfortable with the process,” Skico said.

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## DANCING

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Program also attracts Anglo students.

**Burgueño:** Sure. In the beginning it was only Latinos who came, but there are more and more Anglo kids joining.

**Gallacher:** The program is a confirmation for Latino kids that they are special and that their culture is special. What does it do for Anglo kids?

**Burgueño:** I think they feel special too. It is an opportunity for them to learn more about the Latino culture and make Latino friends. It is also a chance for all the parents to get together and learn more about each other. I think the program changes lives.

**Gallacher:** How did you make your way from Mexico to New York City? What was that experience like?

**Burgueño:** I graduated from school with a degree in chemical engineering and worked for four years in Chihuahua in a chemical plant as a quality supervisor. And one day, I remember asking myself, “Is this it? Is this what I am going to do for the rest of my life?”

That's when I decided to move to the United States and pursue a master's degree in chemical engineering and improve my English. I moved to New York City, about as far north as I could, and started to work.

I did warehouse packing for Macy's and JC Penney's. It was frustrating to come from Mexico as a supervisor and end up just packing boxes.

**Gallacher:** Starting over at the bottom. That is the story of so many immigrants.

**Burgueño:** Yes, but I never stopped dancing. I joined a folklorico group and danced every day. Soon I was teaching and choreographing for them. Some of the immigrant parents who sent their kids there knew I was a chemical engineer, and they asked me to tutor their kids in math and science. That was a good job.

And that job helped me get a job working on computers, and after that I worked as a lab technician, and eventually I was the main technician in a clean room facility creating holograms. But when I wasn't working I was dancing, weekends, nights, whenever.

I went to free English classes that the Garment Workers Union of New York sponsored. And one of the activities they organized while I was there was a cultural week. And some of the students I met there knew I was a dancer, and they asked

me to teach them folklorico dances so we could represent the culture of Mexico. So I did, and that was the beginning of my first dance company.

I asked some of the women garment workers to help me make costumes, and they told me, “Yeah, we can teach you how to do it.” I never did costumes in my life until I got here to this country. I watched how they cut and sewed with their industrial machines. I realized, “I can do this.”

Now, that's what I do. I make the costumes the way my friends in New York taught me.

**Gallacher:** So that's how your first dance company started?

**Burgueño:** Yes, we won first place in the cultural week, and my friends said, “Why don't you keep teaching us?” So that was 1993. I kept teaching, and more people started joining. In 1996, I started working with kids. So then I had a kids group and an adult group. In June of 2001, we were selected as one of the best folklorico dance companies in the country.

Then 9/11 happened and everything started going down in New York. The company where I was working as a lab technician filed for bankruptcy. The economy was bad. I lost my job.

I was trying to decide what I should do when I got a call from the Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, asking me if I would like to come for a job interview. I remember as I drove over the mountains to Aspen for the first time, I said to myself, “This is it, this is where I want to be.”

**Gallacher:** What was moving from the city to the country like for you?

**Burgueño:** The Roaring Fork Valley reminded me of the mountains in Chihuahua where I grew up, so it felt like home in a way. But the adjustment from the city was difficult. It was so quiet. I was missing the sirens and the noise. I needed more to do. I didn't want to just wait for my after-school dance program, so I took a job at Carbondale Elementary School as a teacher's aide, reading to kids. That's when I really started to meet people and learn that a lot of the kids' parents were from the same place I grew up.

**Gallacher:** You teach kids but they teach you. Tell me what you get from children.

**Burgueño:** What I learn from kids is their honesty. They love what they do here in the studio. They love learning and dancing. I don't have brothers and sisters here, but I have all these beautiful families around me. They never let me down. They are there for me. And I am there for them.

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