



Students in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Folklorico program perform throughout the valley and have also traveled abroad.

BAILANDO BILINGUAL

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's Folklorico program celebrates 20 years of cultural crossover.

By Ali Margo

When Francisco Nevarez-Burgueño came to Aspen from New York City in 2002 to run the Folklorico program at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet (aspensantafeballet.com), there were just 25 students involved. Sixteen years later, he has more than 350 between the programs in Aspen and Santa Fe.

The free after-school program was founded by ASFB in 1998 to engage the valley's growing Latino community through teaching traditional dance at public schools in Basalt, Carbondale, Glenwood Springs and Rifle, for kids in kindergarten through 12th grade. The goal of the program is twofold: to give Latino kids a way to preserve and connect with each other and their cultural heritage, and to encourage a connection between Latinos and the rest of the Roaring Fork Valley.

The increase in Anglo participants means a lot to Nevarez-

Burgueño, who was awarded the Governor's Creative Leadership Award in 2016 for his work. "In the beginning, it was for the Latino community, but as the years have gone by, the whole community has become involved," he says, estimating that 25 percent of his students are Anglos. "I really respect these kids and the parents who are teaching them how to live with other races, other communities and other cultures besides their own."

The program's success is not just about its numbers, but increasing demand for its performances. Nevarez-Burgueño says their annual recital, performed at the Aspen District Theatre at the end of the school year, has been sold out for the last several years, forcing them to add a second night. The troupe has been asked to perform at many local fundraisers and events, and has also been invited the Denver Art Museum for the Dia de los Niños and traveled to Costa Rica in 2016 to attend the 10th anniversary of the Festival de Folklore Internacional in Paraiso, as well as the Primer Festival Internacional in Lima, Peru.

Nevarez-Burgueño says Folklorico also provides much needed assistance to local kids and their families, which has become even more vital with the uncertainty of today's political climate. "We offer a support network to our kids and their families that goes way beyond dance," he says. "But when we get together, as soon as the kids get into the line, you can feel it right away. We are like a melting pot in every single class. Our dance program brings us all together."

PHOTO BY JORDAN CURET