

the Sopris Sun

Francisco Nevarez-Burgueño: Teaching dance and so much more

By Debbie Bruell
Sopris Sun Correspondent

When Francisco Nevarez-Burgueño, director of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklórico, first meets with his five- and six-year-old beginning dancers, he tells them to clap. After their typically subdued clapping he tells them, “No, no, no ... really clap! LOUD!” Once they clap to his satisfaction, Nevarez then shows these budding dancers how to make that same resounding sound with their feet.

What he loves most about teaching Mexican folk dancing, Nevarez told The Sopris Sun in an interview earlier this month, are “the faces of the kids when they learn how capable they are to move their bodies and stomp their feet and do it with strength and confidence.”

At the Colorado Creative Industries (CCI) Summit in Carbondale on May 5-6, Nevarez (or Paco, as most people call him) will be awarded a Governor’s Creative Leadership Award for his work with folklórico. According to the CCI website, three such awards are presented each year to “community members that have demonstrated a significant commitment to Colorado’s creative landscape through civic leadership and volunteerism ...”

More than anything else, Nevarez said, dancing folklórico builds kids’ self-esteem.

El callado

Although one would never guess it today, as a young child, Nevarez’s family nicknamed him el callado: “the quiet one.” He was very shy, kept mostly to himself, was bullied by other kids, and was typically chosen last for sports teams “when I was chosen at all,” he said. All that changed as he began to dance.



In Mexico, almost every school—even the poorest of schools—from kindergarten through college has a folklórico dance group. “It’s part of our culture,” Nevarez said. Teacher certification programs for elementary and middle school teachers include training for teaching folklórico. Almost every school festivity or event includes a folklórico presentation by some of the students.

Nevarez was first selected to dance in his school’s folklórico program when he was five years old. He was born in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1963. The middle child of five, he was raised by a single mother. With no extra money to spend on things like dance costumes, his mother wasn’t so sure dancing was a good idea. But he danced that first year of school, and was selected to dance every single year after that.

By middle school he began dancing with a folklórico group outside of school, two hours a day, Monday through Friday, plus a full weekend day when they were preparing for a performance or competition. He danced with this group through high school and college, learning all he could about choreography, lighting and costume-making as well.

New York

Nevarez graduated college with a degree in chemical engineering, worked for three years as a chemical engineer, then moved to New York City in 1991 with the goal of learning English and earning a master's degree in that field. He planned to return to Mexico after receiving his graduate degree.

When he first arrived in New York, Nevarez took a job as a packer in a warehouse, and he was miserable. "I came from Mexico where I was a chemical engineer with 30 people working under me," he related, "then to spend my day packaging in a warehouse ...". He also discovered the cost of graduate school in the United States, and realized that his plan of getting a master's degree was not feasible.

He decided to stay in the U.S. at least until he learned English and enrolled in free English classes in a school run by the Ladies Garment Workers' Union (LGWU). In 1992 the school organized a "Cultural Week," including a talent-show competition. Nevarez's fellow English-learner students — who came from all over Latin America — convinced him to teach them some folklórico dances for the competition.

Their group won first place at the Cultural Week. His classmates enjoyed learning and performing the dances so much that they convinced Nevarez to continue as their dance teacher. His teaching slowly evolved into starting his own dance company, Mexican Images and Traditions. The LGWU allowed him to use empty space in their building free of charge for rehearsals. Nevarez created the choreography, taught the dances, performed along with the group, and in 1996 started a children's company as well. In 2001 his company was nominated as one of the best folklórico companies in the U.S. and was selected to compete in the Chicago National folklórico competition.

Nevarez's work as director of Mexican Images and Traditions was completely volunteer. Any profits the dance company made from performances were invested right back into the company to create more costumes. After the warehouse packaging job, which he left after just eight months, Nevarez held a series of jobs to support himself: a math, science and Spanish tutor for kids; a fiber optic technician; and a technician for a hologram company.

In August 2002, his dance company was invited to perform at New York City's Lincoln Center outdoor festival for members of the United Nations and the Mexican Embassy. At this performance, the Mexican Embassy presented Nevarez with an award for his work creating this highly regarded dance company.

Getting to the valley

Shortly before the Lincoln Center performance, Nevarez was contacted by Aspen Santa Fe Ballet (ASFB) about interviewing for the position of director of the ASFB Folklórico program. As he drove to Aspen from Denver for his initial interview, the views of the landscape convinced him that he would move to Colorado if he were offered the job.

When Nevarez took over as director of ASFB Folklórico, it had existed for two years already and included a total of about 25 girls and one boy. Nevarez has grown the program each year, to a current total of

approximately 185 kids from Rifle to Basalt (roughly 135 girls and 50 boys), plus about 60 kids in the more recently formed Santa Fe (New Mexico) program.

When Nevarez first moved from the Bronx to the Roaring Fork Valley, he found the slower pace of his new life a bit unsettling. "I needed to be busier and hear more kids and noises around me."

In addition to his full-time job as ASFB Folklórico director, he took a job working in the kitchen of Basalt Elementary School. After just three weeks in the kitchen, he was offered a part-time job as a resource coordinator for the Family Resource Center, and then as a school district community liaison for the Basalt schools.

In 2010 he decided one full-time job as Folklórico director was enough and he left his position as community liaison. About one year later, Nevarez's position at ASFB expanded as it started a folklórico program in Santa Fe. Nevarez now directs both programs, oversees the teachers in the Santa Fe folklórico program, and continues to teach classes every day of the week in Rifle, Glenwood, Carbondale and Basalt.

"For the Mexican community, this program teaches the kids what their parents or grandparents used to do in Mexico ... something very important to the culture in Mexico." For the Anglo students, the program gives them an opportunity "to embrace other cultures ... and be part of this melting pot." Nevarez said he loves to see Anglo and Latino kids learning these dances together, "building bridges and relationships and friendships."

Work and rewards

The Folklórico students and their parents describe Nevarez as very demanding and strict. As parent Gina Zambrano told The Sopris Sun, "My daughter knows that if she's not at practice or if she comes late, she can't be in a dance." Zambrano said her daughter has become more responsible in all aspects of her life since joining the Folklórico over three years ago.

The students consistently describe dancing folklórico as hard work. As advanced student Margarita Alvarez explained, "Paco has really high expectations, and we really want to meet them ... and exceed them." When asked whether other teachers or coaches inspire the same kind of drive in these students, Margarita said, "It's different with Paco. Folklórico is more like a family than a team."

"Even when he's harsh, we know it's for the best," added Angel Zavala, who has been dancing in the program for eight years.

Nevarez told The Sun that some of the most important things kids get out of his program are "discipline, a lot of responsibility ... and professionalism."

First place

In 2006 Nevarez brought his group to a folklórico competition in Las Vegas. They won first place overall, competing against over 70 groups from the U.S. and Mexico. As exciting as this experience was for his group of dancers, Nevarez didn't enjoy seeing how sad all the other kids were when they learned that they did not win. At that point, he decided to focus on performances rather than competitions.

Nevarez has taken dancers to perform in Denver, Santa Fe, Las Vegas, Chicago and Mexico. A couple years ago his group had the opportunity to work side-by-side with kids from a dance company in Harlem

that performs traditional African dances. His group is currently planning a trip to Costa Rica to perform and participate in an international folk- dance festival, including workshops to learn dances from around the world.

While kids can participate in the Aspen Santa Fe Folklórico program free of charge (aside from a \$25 annual registration fee), the kids not only have to work hard in dance class, they also have to work hard in school to be able to stay in the program. Nevarez makes sure that every student is getting good grades and behaving well at school, or they cannot continue to dance. ASFB recently hired an educational advisor to help kids in the dance program succeed in school and prepare them for college.

Creating the costumes

The elaborate and vibrantly colored costumes “are as much a part of the dance as the music or the steps or the choreography,” explained Roaring Fork High School junior Tavia Teitler, who has been dancing with Folklórico since she was in kindergarten. “There is a specific costume and a specific style of dance for each region [of Mexico] that we do dances from.”

Nevarez sews the costumes himself with volunteer assistance from parents and grandparents, as well as Nevarez’s mother and sister who come from Mexico to help each year. According to Faith Magill, Tavia’s grandmother who has assisted with this activity for the past 10 years, Nevarez and his helpers spend about four months creating costumes for each spring recital.

Nevarez learned how to make costumes by watching others — the costume-makers in his folklórico group in Mexico, then the retired members of the LGWU who volunteered to create costumes for his first performances in New York.

He typically travels to Mexico once or twice a year to visit family and attend conferences, and returns with a carload of materials. He has converted the garage of his Carbondale home into a costume workshop, including five sewing machines. The one rack of costumes he received when he took his position in 2002 has grown into a room of approximately 400 square feet completely filled with racks of clothing, towers of hats and containers full of fabric.

Nevarez is a strong believer in “using what is already here in this world,” as he described it. He makes slips out of donated bed sheets. New costumes are often refashioned from previous years’ costumes. He once made 24 new costumes out of a set of purple curtains from an ASFB performance of “Romeo and Juliet.” The curtains were discarded and headed for the landfill when Nevarez “rescued” them.

Next steps

What: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklórico performance

When: May 22

Where: Aspen District Theatre; tickets available at aspenshowtix.com.