DANCE, DANCE

CLARK COUNTY

Popularity of ballroom dancing has stirred interest in other forms of the art from all over the world

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT

Claremont staff writer

When “Dancing With the Stars” waltzed onto millions of Americans’ television sets more than three years ago, it was hard to predict the impact it would not just on ballroom dancing, but on the art form as a whole. “We got more enrollment the minute ‘Dancing With the Stars’ came on. It was amazing,” said Patty Krebs, recreation specialist at Vancouver’s Firstenburg Community Center.

Interest in ballroom dance classes is stronger than ever, Krebs and other area activity coordinators say, and it’s having a ripple effect. Enthusiasm has spread beyond the cha-cha, rumba and foxtrot to include globally diverse dances rooted everywhere from Louisiana to Ireland to Cambodia. “I have noticed that we have expanded offerings,” said Tracy Reilly Kelly, Continuing Education Program manager at Clark College in Vancouver. She’s seeing more interest in world culture and diversity, and that curiosity is being unleashed on the dance floor.

Belly dance transports people to the Middle East, while salsa and merengue conjure visions of Latin America. All are popular options at Clark College, Reilly Kelly said.

Also drawing a following is Scottish country dancing, said Lisa Deane, recreation program coordinator for

Get your groove on

Full classes at Clark College are under way, but it’s not too early to start planning ahead for winter quarter, which begins Jan. 5, 2009. For more information about dance classes offered through the Continuing Education Program at Clark College, visit www.clark.edu/continuing.

Vancouver—Clark Parks and Recreation begins its second fall session the end of October and beginning of November. To learn more, visit www.cityofvancouver.us/parks.

Contact information is required from all students registering for classes. Cascade Synergy offers free lessons and dance Tuesdays from 7 to 9 p.m. at Pepper’s in downtown Vancouver. For details, visit cascadesynergy.com.

Photo by MARIKA L. WRIGHT for The Columbian

Connie Mom-Ching, front, teaches an advanced Cambodian dance to Phin Yeang, Raema Frakes and Ashley Kourn. Top: Mom-Ching works one on one with Frakes at Firstenburg Community Center in Vancouver.
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Marshall Community Center and Lulule Senior Center in Vancouver,

beginning and intermediate classes in the discipline have doubled in size in the past two years. Deane said. Part of the appeal is that the dance, while very social, doesn’t require a partner.

In addition to established dance classes, Marshall Community Center added to its fall roster zydeco and Celtic tap. Zydeco is a high-energy Creole dance combining Cajun, African, blues, country, rock and French Caribbean influences, and the community center isn’t the only place to find it.

Changing partners

Pepper’s Taproom in downtown Vancouver is getting in on the dance craze, hosting weekly zydeco sessions organized by Southwest Washington members of the Portland-based nonprofit organization Cascade Zydeco.

It’s a relaxed social dance, and because dancers keep changing partners, they constantly learn new things.

“It’s never the same dance,” said Jim Lalone of Vancouver, chairman of Cascade Zydeco.

Pepper’s dances typically draw about 50 people ranging from small children to seniors. Sometimes dancers spontaneously will get up and join in, seduced by the music.

“It’s kind of infectious,” Lalone said. “It’s upbeat, it energizes you to just be creative.”

Once people get hooked on the dance, they want to know more about the culture surrounding it, Lalone said. Dancers make pilgrimages to Lafayette, La., where the dance originated, and experiment with Cajun cuisine.

While zydeco introduces people to a new culture, Connie Mom-Ching’s Khmer dance classes help Cambodian-Americans reconnect with their heritage.

Vancouver resident Mom-Ching directs the Khmer Angkor Dance Troupe and teaches Khmer folk and classical dance at Firstenberg Community Center through Vancouver’s Clark Parks and Recreation.

Khmer dance, a Cambodian art form dating back 2,000 years, traditionally was performed in the royal court and at sacred rituals as a sacrifice to gods, goddesses or the spirits of dance teachers departed. The dance uses highly stylized hand movements to tell a story.

“It’s all a form of communication,” Mom-Ching said. Dancers “have to be able to understand the music and lyrics and use their hands to describe the meaning of the dance.”

Everything from flowers and other natural objects to beauty and similar abstract concepts has a corresponding hand gesture. Much of the dance is reflective of images of heavenly figures seen on the temple walls of the ancient Cambodian city Angkor Wat.

Many of Mom-Ching’s students are youths, but some parents take the classes to share in the cultural experience with their children.

For Phin Young, the classes help pass on important Khmer traditions to her American-born daughter. 9-year-old Alexis Young.

Yeong, a Vancouver resident who came to the United States from Cambodia in 1989, takes Mom-Ching’s advanced class, and Alexis dances with the younger group.

Alexis speaks primarily English, but her Khmer language skills have improved since she started dancing. Now, when she hears the Khmer word ‘flower’ in a song, she knows what hand gesture to make. Yeong said.

Alexis enjoys practicing dance moves and listening to Cambodian music at home and Yeong hopes this interest continues.

"I just want her to know our traditions, the tone of the music, the way you move," Yeong said.

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Amanda L. Westcott for The Columbian

Nine-year-old Alexis Yeong, front, Charmony Ching, 6, and Elizabeth Koun, 9, learn a classical Cambodian dance from Charmony’s mother, Connie Mom-Ching.