



DANCE, DANCE CLARK COUNTY

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



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

Photos by ANDREA J. WRIGHT for The Columbian

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT
Columbian 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 have 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

DANCE, Page D7

Get your groove on

Fall 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/corporate_continuing_education.

Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation begins its second fall session the end of October and beginning of November. To learn more, visit www.ci.vancouver.wa.us/parks-recreation. Winter classes begin the second week in January.

Cascade Zydeco offers free lessons and dances Tuesdays from 7 to 9 p.m. at Pepper’s Taqueria in downtown Vancouver. For details, visit cascadedydeco.com.



ONLINE VIDEO: Connie Mom-Chhing’s classical Cambodian dance class: columbian.com.

Dance:

From Page D1

Marshall Community Center and Luepke 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 Taqueria 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 30 people ranging from small children to seniors. Sometimes diners 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-Chhing's Khmer dance classes help Cambodian-Americans reconnect with their heritage.

Vancouver resident Mom-Chhing directs the Khmer Angkor Dance Troupe and teaches Khmer folk and classical dance at Firstenburg Community Center through Vancouver-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-Chhing 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-Chhing's students are youths, but some parents take the classes to share in the cultural experience with their children.

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



ANDREA J. WRIGHT for The Columbian

Yeang, a Vancouver resident who came to the United States from Cambodia in 1989, takes Mom-Chhing'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 for flower in a song, she knows what hand gesture to make, Yeang said.

Alexis enjoys practicing dance moves and listening to Cambodian music at home, and Yeang hopes this interest

continues.

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

MARY ANN ALBRIGHT:
maryann.albright@columbian.com
or 360-735-4507.

Nine-year-old Alexis Yeang, front, Charmony Chhing, 6, and Elizabeth Kourn, 9, learn a classical Cambodian dance from Charmony's mother, Connie Mom-Chhing.