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Instructors teach joy / Salsa classes at River Oaks Community Center

By VALERIE SWEETEN, Houston Chronicle correspondent

The way Raul Orlando moves gets a lot of attention.

Thus it's no surprise the owner of Strictly Salsa is being inundated with invitations to parties and bookings for classes. He recently led impromptu lessons at the "Salsa, Samba, Rumba, Gona!" benefit for the Sandra Organ Dance Company.

Orlando is used to leading avid learners in a variety of dance lessons where he emphasizes movement with attitude. In fact, Orlando is taking the city by storm.

He has started a new series of classes with his partner, Joan Bishop, from 6:30 to 7:45 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at the River Oaks Community Center, 3600 Locke Lane.

Originally from Panama City, Panama, Orlando came to Houston in 1995 to study music at the University of Houston. Previously, he obtained a degree in liberal arts with an emphasis in teaching from the Seminario Teologico de Panama.

Now, he is reaching to further his own education to benefit his students.

"My original concept was to dispel the myth that Latin dance was about steps," said Orlando, 37. "I'm trying to improve our teaching methods so we can reach as many types of students as we can."

Believing a good foundation in the basics can lead a dancer to a wide range of moves, Orlando teaches classes in bachata, cha-cha-cha, merengue, casino and rueda.

"I think in terms of teaching joy and inhibition instead of dance. I am teaching students to give themselves permission to dance from their hearts," Orlando said.

Orlando has appeared three times on The Debra Duncan Show. His salsa studio received a city proclamation on Sept. 17, 2003, as Strictly Street Salsa Day, and he is proud of the progress he has made since establishing the studio in August 2001.

As a board member of the World Dance Institute and the Houston Argentine Tango Association, Orlando is striving to have a quality program for salsa students.

"My greatest joy when teaching is when someone begins to feel the passion of the music and are able to express that in their body," Orlando said.

For more information, visit www.strictlystreetsalsa.com or call 713-524-3936.

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