

COMMUNITY

Latin dancers aim to keep culture alive

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Keeping the Latin culture and rhythm alive in Houston has been the impetus behind the recent development in the careers of Latin dance instructors, Raul Orlando and Martha Perez.

The team's latest venture, Strictly Street Salsa, celebrates their one-year anniversary today with city representatives and various art groups and a "grand opening" to re-emphasize their dedication to authentic Latin style and form.

Orlando said, "This was our symbolic opening because we are the only dance studio which focuses on Strictly Street Salsa. We wanted to do something citywide and tell the public the philosophy of the studio."

Their current headquarters is located at 5925 Kirby and provides classes at 1703 Heights Boulevard and 10605 Braewick in the Meyerland area. Four different levels of Street Salsa are offered, and Lose It To Salsa, a dance workout, is also available. Class information is available by calling 713-524-3936.

The partners both have extensive backgrounds and similarities in style that attributes to their dancing success. They've attracted attention from VH-1, the *Debra Duncan Show*, Colombian Folkloric Ballet, the Institute of Hispanic Culture, and *Daybreak News-KPRC*.

Though Orlando began on his own in 1998 with a \$12 investment, his company, Unlimited Talent, evolved into Strictly Street Salsa in the fall of 1999. His classes had become so popular that the classes numbered nine weekly classes at four different locations six days a week. Orlando contributes his success to studying vigorously throughout his entire career even after growing up in Panama and spending time in Costa Rica and New York.

Orlando and Perez teamed up in 2000 after meeting through a dance class ad in the Houston Press. After seeing Perez dance, Orlando knew she was more than a student, and they began their journey into teaching together.

He said, "We talked several times and realized we had the same teaching and dance philosophy. We both believe in the importance of understanding movement and agree that today's Salsa suffers from a tremendous absence of Afro-Latin movement."

Perez, who has studied exten-

sively throughout Mexico and Cuba, added, "We find this is unfair to the person learning because when we see people moving without the use of body isolations, we automatically know they've learned in a ballroom or a video. This is the part we fight so hard to preserve the movement, the heart and soul of the dance. It is not how many spins, turns, or acrobatics one can do that makes them a great dancer. It is how you move."

The cultural aspect of dance is vital to the heart of the dance according to the partners.

"As Latin immigrants we accept the challenge to contribute to our social surrounding by bringing and offering what we've lived and experienced in our countries," Orlando said.

"We found that by teaching Salsa and other popular Latin dances, we could be a vehicle of change and education in our city. We have worked day and night promoting the principles that motivated us to start and that is to keep it authentic."

Educating the public is vital to the team as they sometimes enlist themselves for additional responsibilities throughout the community. Both Perez and Orlando have been consultants and done performances throughout Houston at various elementary schools, Downtown YMCA, Memorial-Herman Wellness Center, Gulfton Area Neighborhood Organization/Central American Refugee Center, and Heights Outreach Inc. They also presented the History of Salsa this past spring at the Institute of Hispanic Culture complete with dance numbers and elaborate costumes. Another historical performance is being planned for the Fall.

Perez's commitment to dancing lies in her joy of teaching.

"A favorite memory of teaching is when you can see how a student or students are perceiving and feeling deep down within. When they are that excited about the movement and the understanding of it," she said.

Orlando added, "When we see them smiling and enjoying the dance, not worried of what step, trick or stunt they could do to amuse the person dancing next to them, is when we see our missions as teachers realized. Once you are on the dance floor, it should be a time to enjoy dancing and your current partner, no matter what level you are at. This is why it was appealing to people in the first place; it was fun!"