

Moving Arts Española

Program Brings Performing Arts, Free Healthy Meals And Inspiration To Children Of Española Valley

By **DEBORAH BEGEL**

On the stage in the big tent at Ohkay Owingeh, just north of Española on New Mexico State Road 68, five girls systematically move about in a carefully choreographed Mexican folklorico dance as a female voice



Maize, 9, dances at the Oñate Center with a Moving Arts Española folklorico class. Photos by Deborah Begel.

sings in Spanish through the speaker on a small cd player. A few feet from the stage, instructor Salvador Ruiz observes the group with close scrutiny. "Left, right," he says methodically, trying to keep the girls in step. Wearing yards and yards of colorful full skirts trimmed near the hem with ribbons, the girls carry bright colored shawls that they interweave as they come together in a circle. They begin to move in and out holding the ends of their shawls. "Don't get too close," Ruiz tells them.

Mondays through Thursdays after school and on Saturdays, Moving Arts Española is a bevy of classes, about 29 in all. In one classroom, three young ballerinas do warm-up plies following a stream of instructions from teacher Whitney Jones. In another classroom, drama students rehearse scenes from their upcoming play, *Murder on the Train*. Elsewhere, young students are learning to walk on stilts in the circus arts class and do summersaults in gymnastics.

The 13,000 square-foot space is filled to capacity, with class sizes that range from just a few to 25 or so. About 190 students are currently signed up for classes at the facility, while another 160 students are taught by Moving Arts teachers in classrooms at La Tierra Montessori School and Ohkay Owingeh Community School. Most students are between 3 and 18 years old.

In the central entry room, parents, grandparents and siblings of the students are talking, playing, and eating. Healthy free meals are offered to all who enter after 3:30 pm. One fall day, cook Laura Cox was serving up a mac-and-cheese-type pasta dish made with pumpkin and hefty portions of green salad. "This is great," said parent Arlene Garcia, whose



An immigrant is arrested in *Beyond the Border*, a play written and performed by students in a drama class.

daughter Querencia Garcia, 10, has sampled a number of classes, including flamenco, hip hop and painting.

"I wish she'd find something she loved and settle in," said her mother. "But I guess it's also good that she's trying different things."

In January, Moving Arts Española celebrated its 10th anniversary. It was co-founded by Ruiz and Roger Montoya, who saw a need for after-school programs in the Española Valley. Both men come from performance backgrounds, Ruiz as a folklorico dancer in Mexico and Montoya as a contemporary dancer in New York City and Los Angeles. Montoya's also an accomplished painter and gymnast, and a co-founder of La Tierra Montessori School, which is near Moving Arts and a close partner in various arts classes and activities.

Before Moving Arts Española settled into its home at Ohkay Owingeh, Montoya and Ruiz offered performance arts classes in Española Valley schools. Over time, the men were able to partner with other local organizations and schools to institute more programs. The group moved into the building at Ohkay Owingeh in 2014 and expanded into the adjoining "tent" a year later.

The students perform at the end of each semester at Moving Arts and elsewhere. Last November, the group was invited to contribute an 18-minute performance at Northern New Mexico College's Foundation Gala.

"The goal of the organization," says Montoya, who is also Artistic Director, "is to inspire children through arts education, to provide opportunities for the kids to grow into themselves, to learn more about who they are, what their passion and purpose in life might be, and then hopefully to create a pathway as they become young adults."

While this may seem like a lofty goal, some students have already taken skills gained at Moving Arts to higher levels, to excel in their chosen field. Than Povi Martinez, from the Pueblo de San Ildefonso, told



Lucas, 7, (front left) and Malakai, 7, tell Zoe, 9, and Leyla, 9, (front right) that they can't wait to join the Fashion Design class next semester.

Montoya and Ruiz the first time they met, when she was four and a half, that she wanted to become the next great Native American ballerina, following in the footsteps

of prima ballerina Maria Tallchief. At 14, Than Povi is now a lead dancer at New Mexico School for the Arts in Santa Fe. "Her dream is coming

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true," said Montoya.

Cristian Madrid, 18, credits his many successes with Moving Arts. After mastering gymnastics in just a few weeks, he reached "level 10," and went on to become a teacher himself. "It's been a good place to grow and to mature," he says, "and to develop life skills that I'll carry with me. I feel like if it wasn't for Moving Arts, I wouldn't be where I am doing the things that I'm doing."

Last fall Cris entered the University of Texas at San Antonio on a full academic and athletic scholarship. He says he hopes to return to Moving Arts someday and help the organization not only to continue to offer a variety of classes, but also to help expand the organization's reach and resources through effective business practices.



Ila Benson, 3, shows her drawing of a playground.

Ruiz, who has a couple decades of experience in the business world, on top of his dancing career, is also Executive Director of the organization. He chuckles when the topic of funding comes up. "It's a special challenge to survive in the nonprofit world," he says.

The organization does charge students a minimal amount for classes, but those who cannot pay are offered scholarship opportunities to offset their tuition, for example cleaning up, organizing the children during performances and helping

serve meals. "It's affordable," says Garcia, who's been bringing Querencia to classes since the doors first opened. Garcia notes that the classes are a godsend for parents, giving them a little extra time to run an errand or two when their children are in class. "My daughter's in a safe environment," Garcia says, "and the diversity here is awesome."

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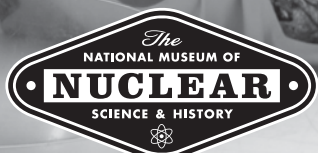
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Although foundations like McCune Charitable Foundation and LANL Foundation and charities like United Way of Northern New Mexico have been enthusiastic about funding Moving Arts, the annual budget is still \$300,000, with just over 40 percent coming from grants, donations and a reimbursement from HELP New Mexico for food. Most of the rest comes from tuition. Only five people are part-time staffers, while about 40 people are paid as teachers, youth mentors and tutors.

Tutoring is available to students who are struggling in school. Says Board of Directors Secretary HelenMarie Zacharitz, "Many students have improved by grade levels."

Last fall, a drama class wrote and produced a play about immigration. Called *Beyond the Border*, the performance was a mix of scenes in which immigrants are badly treated. For example, a young woman waits for hours in a U.S. Immigration office to try to figure out what's happening with her visa application. The judge, played by Isaac Jerome Lopez, doesn't seem to care. At the end of each scene, co-director Devon Hoffman asked the audience to imagine a different ending, and he invited people on stage to act out a new version.

Now 12, Isaac has been coming to classes at Moving Arts since he was two and a half. He has studied gymnastics, hip hop, ballet and flamenco, but then he began to narrow his sights. "I told my mom, I don't want



Roger Montoya helps Amor, 6, do a somersault.

to do ballet anymore. I want to focus more on my drama and gymnastics," he said.

He smiled. Then he added, "And this summer I landed my first front flip!"

Eleven-year-old Magdalena Samora McNeil also acted in the immigration play. She explained why she likes to come to Moving Arts. "Well, part of the reason why I come back," she said, "is because everybody is super supportive, whether it's the kids or the instructors. And even if

you mess up, they're like, 'You just keep trying.' "

Back in the folklorico class, one of the dancers asks Ruiz, "Should we smile?" "No," he answers. "Not during this song."

A few parents have come in to watch. Ashley Lopez says she's there to watch her boyfriend's daughter, 8-year-old Feliciana Baca. "This (folklorico) class keeps our heritage alive," Lopez says. "Resources for youth are limited around here. And this program is very positive."

Feliciana's mother, Tabitha Mondragon, has been listening. Suddenly smiling, she adds her own opinion. "Sometimes I think we parents love this place even more than the kids," she says.

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