



Culture in Motion

Celebrating Puerto Rico's Traditions in East Austin

WORDS BY JENNIFER SIMONSON PHOTOS BY AARON RIMBEY

Twenty years ago, an Austin woman started a dance class looking to reconnect with her traditional Puerto Rican roots. Since then, that dance class has grown into a full-fledged Puerto Rican Cultural Center complete with dance and music classes, social and cultural events, an annual festival, and a bilingual theater.

Dr. Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard founded the center in 1997 in east Austin. Born and raised in a musical family in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in The Bronx, music was always a part of Maynard's life. When she moved to Austin in 1992, she could not find an outlet for her Puerto Rican musical longings. She embraced the Mexican culture prevalent in Central Texas and began dancing with the Roy Lozano Mexican folkloric company, but when her first born came along, she felt a tug back to her traditional culture.

“I realized how much I missed my own culture and how sad I was that my son would never know his own culture,” she said.

So Maynard decided to change that. Starting with one small dance class, the center slowly grew into a nonprofit with 12 weekly performing arts programs, ongoing cultural events, a theater company and opportunities to learn indigenous cultural traditions. The cultural center grew out of its tiny space shared with Tapestry Dance Company and into its own space in a former bakery on Tillery Street.

Dance is still the backbone of the center. It is not unusual to stop by and see girls with pillowy colorful dresses glide around the room to the sounds of traditional percussion-driven music, Afro-Caribbean beats and cuatro guitars.

The cultural center is open to anyone looking to learn more about Puerto Rican culture. “We are



Events

- Open House: every Saturday, 10am-1pm! Come enjoy FREE Puerto Rican coffee and conversation!
- Celebrando 2017: 20th Anniversary Salsa & Heritage Festival, June 10, 6:30-11pm. We'll be celebrating our 20th anniversary! Each year this elegant, semi-formal event celebrates Puerto Rico's rich traditions with folklore and more!
- 20th Birthday Bombazo: Sept. 10. We'll be celebrating our 20th birthday with a bombazo, a Bomba dance for all.
- Sembrando Herencia 2017 (Musical): December 2 & 3



“The Puerto Rican culture flows through your bloodstream; you cannot separate from it. It is a very joyous culture.”

very nurturing and embracing here,” Maynard smiles. “We open our arms to everyone. We celebrate and nurture community under the umbrella of Puerto Rican culture because that is what we know.”



The center is also a place for the fast-growing Puerto Rican population in Central Texas to reconnect with their culture. Everyone born on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean island is an American citizen. Because of the island’s depressed economy over the last decade, many Puerto Ricans are relocating to the mainland with Texas being one of the most popular destinations. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center is the only dedicated community center for Puerto Ricans in the Southwest affiliated with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture.



To stay connected to its culture, Maynard visits Puerto Rico every summer. Also a playwright, she allows time during these trips to learn oral history (first-hand, from elders) who inspire the writing of a new play for community theater to be performed each December. These bilingual musicals are told with Maynard’s magical style as she uses music and dance to bring elements of Puerto Rico’s heritage to life.



“The Puerto Rican culture flows through your bloodstream; you cannot separate from it. It is a very joyous culture,” Maynard enthuses. “No matter what problems you might currently be facing, there’s always room for music and dance.” **E**

contact:
512.251.8122
701 Tillery Street #13
prfdance.org
dance@prfdance.org

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