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Rich in tradition

By Julie Rene Tran, Daily Texan Staff

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The blessed, wooden warrior drum rests quietly in the costume closet of the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Center in Austin. Hand-chiseled by the chief of his mother's native Puerto Rican tribe, the Taino, the instrument is just one way 14-year-old William Maynard maintains a bond with his native land which he has only visited once.

In the hub of an East Austin neighborhood on Tillery Street, the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Center is the only community center for Puerto Ricans in the Southwest. The nonprofit center offers 12 classes per week on traditional dances and music, including lessons for the large bomba drum and the small cuatro guitar, two of the island's national instruments.

On a typical Saturday morning at the center, sharp afro-beats fill the dance room as girls in billowing skirts sashay to the rhythm. Their parents sit on benches, watching from a glass window, while soft chords strummed from the cuatro play from another practice room.

"We're not going to have the largest Puerto Rican community in Austin, but the fact that we are in the center is very significant," said Dr. Ana Maria Maynard, William's mother and founder of the center.

Located within the heart of Texas, Austin makes it easy for those in surrounding cities to drive to events and classes, she added.

If a corridor is drawn from Dallas to Houston, containing Killeen, Austin and San Antonio, those cities are home to 81 percent of the Puerto Ricans in Texas, Maynard said.

Since the economy has fallen drastically in the last five years in Puerto Rico, more and more people are leaving the island to find jobs in the states, Maynard said, with most migrating to Texas. According to the Puerto Rico Federal Affairs Administration, Texas has the fastest growing Puerto Rican population.

"Every time I turn around, I'm meeting new people," Maynard said. "So it's hard to know how many people we have here, because if we look at the numbers from 2000, it's not



Lawrence Peart | Daily Texan Staff
Alejandro Reyna, 12, and instructor
Jessica Montoya practice a traditional
dance at the Puerto Rican Folkloric
Dance Center. It is the only community
center for Puerto Ricans in the
southwest United States.

*Janet Caylor, a mar
waterfront business o
during the cur*



According to the 2000 U.S Census Bureau, there are 69,504 Puerto Ricans in Texas, which is 0.3 percent of Texas' total population. The Census Bureau has not yet published Puerto Rican demographics for 2010.

Maynard said what attracts the people to Texas is its similarities to the island: warm weather, low cost of living and a large Hispanic community. A family-oriented culture, she said, Puerto Ricans like to stay close together.

“What happens with the Puerto Rican community is that once you start having friends and relatives coming, they follow because we like to be together,” Maynard said. “We’d rather go somewhere where we know people than to go somewhere and be alone.”

When Maynard came to Austin 20 years ago to work for IBM, there was nothing in Austin for Puerto Ricans, she said. The closest thing to home that she could get, she said, was the Mexican community and the fellow dance members of Ballet Folklorico de Mexico.

“It was a wonderful experience to be embraced by a community that was not mine,” she said.

However, when Maynard had her son William, she realized it was not enough.

“I started to think about my heritage and how I grew up and all things that were meaningful to me that made me the person that I am today,” Maynard said. “I realized by living here in Austin, my son would not have any of that.”

She said she remembers watching cultural performances at an international fair at Concordia University 14 years ago with her newborn. China, Mexico and Scotland all had dancers representing their country and culture, but there were no Puerto Rican dancers.

“I’m looking at my son and feeling so bad that I had all this knowledge about my culture, but I wasn’t doing anything that would help him learn and appreciate it,” she said.

That was the moment she said she promised she would do something.

She spent the next nine months engineering a plan and held her first traditional Puerto Rican dance class that fall.

Fourteen years later, the program has grown from a small classroom of six students, half of which were Maynard’s friends, to a center frenzied by children’s laughter and footsteps. And Maynard’s mission has extended from just teaching song and dance to upholding the connection to Puerto Rico, starting with the youth.

“To see all the children really embrace their heritage, it’s rewarding,” Maynard said.

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