

Cultura

How Puerto Rican Cultural Center helped put island's cultura on Central Texas map

Austin's Puerto Rican Cultural Center turns 25 this year. What started as a dream and three dancers has transformed into a hub, bringing the area's Puerto Rican community and beyond together through diverse cultural arts programming. From navigating the pandemic to temporary closures, the center hopes to keep moving pa'lante.

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Austin's Puerto Rican Cultural Center turns 25 in 2022. It's the only cultural center in Texas and the Southwest affiliated with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture because of its authentic and high-quality cultural programming. Photo contributed by Puerto Rican Cultural Center



As Noche Buena approached more than a decade ago, Yolanda Maisonet found herself feeling pangs of homesickness. She'd recently moved to Texas from the East Coast, where she'd been heavily involved with the Puerto Rican community. But in Central Texas, and especially around the Christmas holidays, she desperately missed Puerto Rican customs and traditions.

An online hunt for the local Puerto Rican community led to her discovery of the East Austin-based Puerto Rican Cultural Center. She immediately reached out, but the center was closed for the holidays and she felt crushed. Maisonet decided to leave a message with a heartfelt plea for a response.

She still tears up when she recalls hearing back from the center's Founding Executive & Artistic Director Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard who invited her to the center's annual Octavitas celebration, a joyful tradition after Three Kings Day in January that wraps up the holiday season.

"It's been like a little piece of Puerto Rico outside of the island that's satisfied my homesickness," says Maisonet, a native of Manatí, Puerto Rico. More than 10 years later, she is now a vital part of the center, serving as a dancer, actor and wardrobe consultant, often designing the outfits for the center's major productions.

The nonprofit center, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, remains the only cultural center in Texas and the Southwest affiliated with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture because of its authentic and high-quality cultural programming.

On June 12, the center will mark its milestone anniversary from 3-8 p.m. with a celebration event at the JCC Austin exploring the shared African roots of Puerto Rican and Mexican folkloric traditions. Featured performers include

Roy Lozano's Ballet Folklórico de Texas, live music by Fandango Tejas as well as the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Performing Company and Junior Company and the center's musicians plus guest artists.

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ROOTS



In 1998, the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance group made its debut performance with three dancers. Photo contributed by Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Walking into the Puerto Rican Cultural Center today, visitors can find dance classes, music programs and community theater workshops. But Maynard remembers what it felt like before she launched the center to not see her heritage represented in Central Texas.

In January 1997, Maynard volunteered at an international cultural fair at Concordia University, where she and her friends watched dance performances from across the world. But Puerto Rico was missing.

“As I looked at my 6-month-old son sitting in his car seat-stroller, I realized he would never know the vibrant joy of his culture -- the culture of my homeland,” she says. “That was the moment I made the commitment to him and to my community that next year, we would be on that stage!”

By the fall of 1997, Maynard, who had been dancing for Roy Lozano’s Ballet Folklórico de Texas for six years, had put together her first class in plena, a Puerto Rican folkloric dance style. She still remembers renting the studio on Monday nights for an hour and the baby ducks painted on the studio’s back wall.

In January 1998, Maynard returned to Concordia’s cultural fair, but this time debuted the fledgling three-dancer company. They wore homemade folkloric outfits and danced to recorded music, but Maynard realized she was on to something bigger when people began screaming with excitement and they received the loudest applause of the day.

The cultural center grew gradually over the coming years, adding live drumming in 1999 and children and youth programs in 2001. Maynard considers the launch of the children and youth programs as a major turning point for the organization. An obvious energy shift occurred.

“Now we had moms, dads, abuelitas and little children,” she says. “It started feeling less like we are classes and a performing company and more like we are a community.”

In 2006, the center renovated an industrial East Austin space that now serves its 20-member multi-generational company of dancers, musicians and junior dancers.

“I call ourselves a community that bonds like an extended family,” she says.

A ‘SAFE SPACE’



Founding Executive & Artistic Director Ana María Tekina-eirú Maynard (right) works with dancers after rehearsal ahead of upcoming performance. Photo by Nancy Flores

After a recent rehearsal for the June anniversary performance, Erika Crespo and a couple of other dancers stayed late to practice a few moves in their folkloric dresses ahead of their official dress rehearsal. They wanted to get a feel for how the dresses moved and flowed differently compared to their usual practice skirts.

“It’s a bit disorienting, isn’t it?” Maynard asked as the dancers twirled.

For Crespo, performing with the folkloric dance company was something she never imagined. “I don’t dance,” she says. “Everybody who knows me knows that.”

Crespo, who’s half Black and half Puerto Rican, first learned of the center more than five years ago when she grew interested in learning more about her Puerto Rican heritage.

“I never felt like I was Black enough and I never felt like I was Hispanic enough,” she says. “I was always raised Black, but I knew that was only a part of it. I never knew anything about Puerto Rican culture.”

Crespo participated in one of the cultural center’s plays around 2015, but eventually lost touch with the center. In late 2021 though, driven by a need to further dive into her history and heritage, she reconnected with Maynard.

“I’ve been on a journey of wholeness,” Crespo says. “I want to feel complete in my skin.” She began participating in a class focused on the art of Afro-Puerto Rican stick and machete fighting. Eventually, she took a leap of faith and began learning folkloric dances too. With every program she participates in, she soaks up more about Puerto Rico’s history, culture and indigenous roots.

“For the first time maybe ever, I feel comfortable in my skin because I know more about who I am,” she says. “Everybody expects for me to speak Spanish or to know about the culture, but if I was never taught, then how could I know? This has become a place where I can learn, be taught - a safe space.”

FACING EYE OF HURRICANE AND PANDEMIC



The Puerto Rican Cultural Center's original musicals have become a beloved part of its programming. "Las Lavanderas" highlighted women who stood up to demand better working conditions in 19th century San Juan. Photo contributed by Puerto Rican Cultural Center

When Hurricane María devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, Central Texans with ties to the island - some who had never participated in the cultural center's activities - gravitated toward the East Austin community hub.

Many of those folks were still experiencing shock, some didn't know if their families had survived. The cultural center kept its doors open and hot coffee flowing for those who needed to talk.

The cultural center became the central point for Puerto Rico relief efforts in Austin. Residents from across Central Texas began donating emergency items and soon the cultural center filled with boxes of canned goods and diapers that were eventually airlifted to the mountains of Puerto Rico.

But nothing has brought the center as much uncertainty as a global pandemic. Like many local nonprofit cultural arts facilities, the cultural center has struggled these past couple of years as it dealt with closing its doors temporarily during lockdown and subsequent variant surges.

“There have been many times along this COVID journey that I wondered if we would survive just from the financial point of view,” Maynard says.

There’s been little sleep and lots of extra grant writing behind the scenes. Between juggling programming changes to figuring out how to maintain funding, Maynard says her spirituality has deepened. Learning to breathe and wait has been an integral part of the last couple of years.

Like other local cultural art leaders, she’s anxiously waiting for the city’s cultural arts funding, which has been undergoing a revision process, to begin flowing again. “Myself and other arts organizations are not out of the woods. And not everyone is going to make it unfortunately,” she says.

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PA’ LANTE

The addition of children and youth programs in 2001 was a major turning point for the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, according to its founder. Photo contributed by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center

Adjusting to a new reality has also meant growing in unexpected ways. The center added virtual and livestream programming to its offerings, an ancestral fighting arts class launched over Zoom and a junior dance company was born after seeing the consistent commitment of the center's young dancers who were learning moves remotely.

Gradually, the cultural center has been bringing back its in-person classes and aims to get back to its typical offering of 12 weekly classes in everything from indigenous Taino traditions to beginner percussion class. And there's more programming that Maynard dreams about like launching classes for seniors in the future.

"I'm grateful for the children who come back as adults and share how much our culture center meant to them in their growing up years," she says. "For me, that's everything."

These past couple of years have gotten Maynard thinking more about legacy and empowering the next generation to continue preserving Puerto Rican culture and traditions.

"By the grace of God, we made it here (to the 25th anniversary)," she says.

While the financial uncertainty still looms, Maynard forges ahead. She's not exactly sure how the cultural center will make it until additional funding comes through, but "I know that we will somehow."

PUERTO RICAN CULTURAL CENTER FALL 2022 EVENTS

Sept. 11: 25th Birthday Bomba Social with birthday cake celebration (2-5 p.m., free and indoors)

Sept. 18: Yara Taino Harvest Gathering (4-7 p.m., free and family-friendly games and ceremonial dance)

Oct. 9: Indigenous Heritage Celebration (save the date, more details this fall)

Nov. 12: 9th Annual Roberto Clemente Memorabilia & Arts Display

For more information, visit prfdance.org. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center is located at 701 Tillery St. in Austin, Texas.

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By Austin Vida Staff Jan. 10, 2022



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