

# Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Company

## Founder Anna Maria Maynard

**T**hey say that by the year 2050, people of Hispanic descent will account for a quarter of the U.S. population – an exciting prospect, considering how much the culture contributes to the American landscape now. It's easy, for example, to see how Mexican heritage has helped make Austin what it is today – from the music scene to local cuisine to political activism. Look closer and you'll see yet another burgeoning sector – the Puerto Rican population – making its mark.

"I see more and more Puerto Rican flags in cars and on bumper stickers lately," says Anna Maria Maynard, director of the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Company. She and the company have made quite an impression on the Austin community. Their performances and adult classes in Puerto Rican dance, music and culture have attracted large audiences and the attention and support of local and national arts groups, including the National Endowment for the Arts.

Maynard founded the company in 1997, a year after having her first child.

"You reflect on life differently when you have a child," she said. "I wanted something about the culture to give to my son, so I took skills God gave me – dancing, playing instruments and music, organizational skills – to share my culture primarily with my children but ultimately with my community."

Maynard knew first-hand the importance of early exposure to her rich culture. She was raised in the Bronx,

New York, where Puerto Rican culture abounds.

"Music is fundamental to Puerto Rican culture," she said. "I danced and sang as a child and that fostered an interest in music so deep I almost majored in it in college." She earned a bachelor's degree in science and a doctorate in computer engineering, but her passion for music and dance persisted. The high-tech field brought Maynard here in 1992, but the community's multicultural mix and thriving art scene kept her here.

"The rich Mexican heritage gave me comfort," she said. "It was nice to hear the language and music." For six years, Maynard danced with Ballet Folklorico, one of Austin's traditional Mexican dance companies. This month, the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance Company begins its children's classes for ages 5 and up. The hour-long sessions will offer more than dance lessons.

"We'll teach children's games played and passed down for generations in Puerto Rico," Maynard said. "We'll show videos and read books I've been collecting from the island for nearly a decade. And classes will be bilingual. We won't speak exclusively in Spanish or English. In my experience, exposure to languages in practical settings like this is more natural and effective than exposure in class."



Anna Maria Maynard

Learning the dances promotes learning about the Hispanic diaspora.

"Most branches of the group share some fundamental ingredients – Native, Spanish and African influences. But what's fascinating to see is how the

combinations in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Brazil and other countries yield such different and beautiful results."

Children's classes begin Aug. 18. Teen and adult classes start Aug. 13. Registration is required. Call 251-8122.