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Yadira's Austin: Puerto Rican culture

By [Yadira Izquierdo](#) - Saturday November 20, 2010 - 9:39 am
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In my previous articles, I have shown that Austin's art scene is dynamic, colorful and diverse. So I didn't have any reason to be surprised when I heard about Austin having a Puerto Rican Cultural Center.

"I opened the doors on September 10, 1997. My first class was a "plena" (traditional

Puerto Rican dance) class and I had 6 students," said Ana Maria Maynard, a full time engineer and Founder and Director of PRF Dance Company and Cultural Center. The center is dedicated "to promote cultural awareness and pride through authentic performances, cultural events, and high-quality educational programs in the folkloric performing arts (dance, music, and theatre), history and cultural traditions" here in Austin.

When I asked Maynard why she opened a Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Austin, with a smile on her face, she said: "When I had my son, my first baby, things changed because I think having a child makes you think about life in a different way. I looked at my son and I felt sad that my son would grow outside of his culture, which means so much to me and really shaped me as a person. That was the moment I decided to do something for my culture." But her love for Puerto Rico came way before that; it started when she was growing up in the Bronx. "When I was a little girl, around 5 or 6 years old, I used to hear "la isla" (the island) calling me... I always felt the isla, even though I was so far away. In my home the culture was very a live. I basically lived in Puerto Rico," explained Maynard.

The "call" was the result of a strong cultural background; Maynard was born into a family in which she was taught to feel love for her heritage. "My mother always told me: If anybody asks you, you tell them you're Puerto Rican."

Her family and the way they lived their heritage helped Maynard develop a clear idea of what she wanted in life. "Many people are born on this Earth and they don't know why they're here and they spend a huge part of their life searching: Who am I? What am I going to do with my life? What is the meaning of my life? I know why I'm here: I'm here to do this and I feel so blessed and so honored and such a deep responsibility to my people to provide a place for them to be together, to find a sense of community and where the children can learn about their culture," said Maynard. For her, this is particularly important because if, "children have a strong sense of their identity, they can grow up to be who they're meant to be."

Another topic that's important to Maynard is bringing back to life Puerto Rican's indigenous (Taino) heritage. "I firmly believe that Puerto Ricans are a blend of three races... but we need to restore the "primera raiz" (first root)." That's why their upcoming performance, 500 Years, is going to include Taino language, Spanish and English. "Your culture never leaves you, it stays in your heart," concluded Maynard.

500 Years is a musical that tells the story of a girl and her journey to preserve her identity. In a way, it's easy to imagine the way Maynard, who wrote the musical, drew on her own experiences in order to write the script. For more information about the play and the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, go to: <http://casita.prfdance.org>



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