

Alameda teacher uses art to bridge, combine cultures

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For Dan Nguyen, dance builds a bridge between cultures.

Nguyen, the 43-year-old founder of Nguyen Dance Company and a full-time dance teacher at the College of Alameda, describes his approach to the art as a fusion of Vietnamese and American styles.

With bachelor's and master's degrees in dance and choreography, the Alameda resident has studied all styles of dance — from hip-hop to ballroom dancing — and he combines many of these elements in his modern approach.

For the past three years he has traveled to Vietnam annually to perform and teach dance, always returning with renewed inspiration.

"Whatever I learn, I want to give it back to the younger generation," he says. "Especially people who have never had the opportunity or money to learn dance."

His company is performing Saturday at the Multicultural Entertainment Extravaganza at the Mission City Center for Performing Arts in Santa Clara.

The event will also feature martial artists, Chinese acrobats, Indian, Mexican and Filipino dance troops, African and Latin American musicians and Native American, Norwegian and Japanese storytellers.

Nguyen, who came to the Bay Area from South Vietnam in 1983, began exploring the art of dance when he came to America. He studied ballet and classic dance styles but says he only truly discovered himself when he began doing improvisational dance in New York's Central Park.

Nguyen considers it his mission not only to learn as many styles of dance as possible, but also to influence others with his experience and passion.

He teaches a mixed group at the College of Alameda. His students range in age from 15 to 65 and represent a diverse variety of ethnicities and physical and mental abilities.

As a teacher, Nguyen is accepting of everyone; he even encourages students in wheelchairs and students with mental illness to participate, arranging dances to accommodate them.

Just because you can't move your legs doesn't mean you can't be a dancer," he insists.

"Danny is amazingly versatile," says Nan Busse, a student in his choreography class. "He always comes up with dances that look good, and everyone is able to perform. If it moves, it inspires Danny.

"He's a master teacher because he can work with anyone who walks in the door and turn them into a dancer," says Peggy DeCoursey, one of Nguyen's students and a full-time disabled students' counselor.

She admires how Nguyen can help even the most shy and withdrawn students overcome their anxiety and discover new forms of expression through movement.

"He doesn't pass any judgment at all, so disabled students and first-time dancers are able to do incredible things," she says. "What they can't express verbally they can express with great joy and abandon as a dancer and performer."

Nguyen has been known to dance for more than 12 hours a day. Many of his students find his constant energy and determination infectious.

"He's unstoppable," Busse says. "If there's an opportunity to dance, he's there no matter what."

"Dancing is my love," admits Nguyen, whose compact figure is extremely athletic and toned. "I dance until I drop."

His program in Vietnam teaches students traditional Vietnamese dances and exposes them to the music and culture.

For DeCoursey, collaborating with Vietnamese dancers during the trip last year was an experience like no other.

"There was a communication between the two groups that went beyond all cultural differences," she says.

On the trips Nguyen also conducts dance workshops for Vietnamese orphans.

"My main goal is to go to Vietnam and help out the children who have never felt love," Nguyen says. "If you are a true artist, you give without expecting anything in return."

This year the group has been invited to teach at the Ha Noi Circus Company in Vietnam, which consists of young acrobats, jugglers and trapeze artists. Nguyen can't wait to collaborate with these talented young circus artists.

He hopes to eventually bring the circus to the Bay Area to perform.

"We are exchanging cultures," he says. "How exciting is that?"

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