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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### DANCING LATINO STYLE PROUD

**"D**ANCE is my LIFE! I cannot live without it", says Ana Ines Barraga King, the director and founder of the Latin Ballet of Virginia, an organization aimed to promote the Hispanic culture amongst the American community and others, "but most important to me is to be able to embrace all minority children and their families who are in need of love and connecting to their new environment" explains the director being the main objective of her organization and the valuable meaning it has to her.

King has always been fascinated and attracted to other cultures and what people can learn from them, such as their traditions and histories. She was born in 1957, in Bucaramanga, the capital and largest city of the department of Santander, Colombia. At a very young age, she learned jazz, flamenco, and modern dance thanks to her mother, Dora Olarte de Barragan, a professional dancer. She also thought her the importance of supporting and helping others, as well as her grandmother, who was a poet, and her father, who was a doctor who treated everyone regardless of their ability to pay, "Mom and dad never worried about money

or things for themselves; they were always giving to others", King tells.

She attended the Instituto Departamental de Bellas Artes of Colombia, where she procured a BFA in dance and choreography. Afterwards, King began her artistic direction at the Santander Jazz Ballet in Colombia from 1985 to 1995.

Now, almost thirty years ago, King decided to move to Richmond and marry her husband, William King. She continued her education at Virginia Commonwealth University where later she joined its faculty in the Department of Dance and Choreography. "I knew very little English but it was easy for me to adapt to a new culture." She answered in the Boomers & Shakers Questionnaire, in 2013. While this new culture shock was challenging for her, it was more difficult for her daughter. She was very unhappy when she was assigned to an 'English as a Second Language' class until she was asked to write an essay about her culture. "She made a video of herself dancing SALSA", King shares happily. She just witnessed that, through dancing, her daughter's behavior remarkably changed. Her daughter's confidence, sense of

security, and motivation all returned with her presentation, which was a major step towards a happy and successful life.

This was a huge inspiration for King to start the educational program, "Be Proud of Yourself" which aims to help children and their families feel at home in their new community and always be proud of their roots. In order to enrich and connect communities through Hispanic cultural dance experiences, it was necessary to produce dance theater works with a commitment to education, diversity, and accessibility as part of the educational program.

Every production and choreography is focused on teaching the literature, history, and the traditions of Hispanic culture, which lead King to call herself and her team 'Ambassadors of dance and culture'. "I strongly believe that the arts in education can save lives", King said, "We are also serving the minority, youth who have been abused or neglected, and children with special and financial needs".

Evidently, King and her staff faced challenging obstacles that could may or not interfere in the development of

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the Ballet institution, which was mainly the struggle of running a non profit arts organization that continues to be funded. None- theless, it's a constant struggle to provide professional dancers with support, to which King explains in the B&S Questionnaire, that her main struggle is having to deny people because there is no funds or resources to welcome them. "I believe that everyone deserves the arts", she says.

In spite of that, King's work has brought access to a diversity of artistic expressions to many hispanic families who can now feel represented by her efforts and her job contributing to the community, and the Latin Ballet of Virginia has continued to thrive. As a result of her incredible achievements and skills, King has received numerous awards and distinctions, such as the Theresa Pollak Prize for Excellence in the Arts in 2011, and the YWCA of Richmond's Outstanding Women Award for Arts in 2015.

In 2016, King received an invitation to a peculiar ceremony being held in Richmond, but concurrent to that, King was on tour with her company, so she answered, "I can't go to the ceremony, I'm touring with the team". She thought they were just inviting her to attend a random event that could always happen another time, but what she didn't expect was

that the ceremony was being hosted by the Library of Virginia, who had chosen her to receive the Women in History Award. They called her one last time at the last minute to ask if she didn't want to accept the award, and when King knew, she dashed to claim it. King reiterates that she was the first Hispanic woman in Virginia to receive that award, which is a wonderful achievement for her and the hispanic community. "I think it's pretty funny," King laughs, referring to her antic story.

Later, in 2017, King was named "Person of the Year " by the Richmond Times Dispatch, a program that honors servant-leaders and others who strengthen the Richmond region, but specializes in business, sports and entertainment coverage.

Among many other recognizable awards, it is important to mention that she also received the Jane Baskerville Award for the best community education program for World Languages in Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia in 2004. This award could have not been possible if it wasn't for a boy who took part of King's classes in her institution.

During King's time teaching in her dancing program, she started teaching Spanish language through dance, playing maracas and dancing merengue, when a boy suddenly came up to the stage

saying, "This is so cool and pretty hard," he said cheerfully, "I want to learn!". In the end, he completed an entire 15-week residency and ended up with a scholarship to attend dance lessons after school. "I remember him calculating how many turns in a second a dancer could do while we were learning how to turn across the floor," says King. Now, the boy is an engineer with masters and doctorates at a young age.

Everyday there's a new story to tell and share from each student, group or just any random situation that occurs in the Latin Ballet. For example, this one time, a kid had to be separated from King's class by an academic teacher because he was showing aggressive and uncooperative behavior during the class. The boy was from a Japanese family and had never been to the United States before. He had to go to school with a social worker in order to control his temper. "He was way too smart for his age", comments King. At only 8 years-old he was already enrolled in middle school. He would bite his head against the walls because he was frustrated that he could comprehend everything while the others couldn't.

Then this other time, King had to teach her class in the school gym because the auditorium was occupied that day. And at the other side of the gym, far from where the dan-

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cing class was being held, a group of special education students with numerous autism problems were just staring at the others while they played sports. And when King started to play music for her class to begin the lesson, the special education kids were trying their best to clap, smile, and move to the beat of the music; however, one of them, a kid who could barely walk because of his condition, came dragging his feet clumsy and wanted to hug King and dance with her. As a direct consequence of this, the Dance as Therapy program for children with autism was established.

Ana Ines and the Latin Ballet of Virginia have been highly acclaimed around the state over the last couple of years thanks to many extraordinary distinctions. Even various forms of media have recognized the organization's achievements, for instance, PBS brought the Latin Ballet to the public's attention by broadcasting the program "Danza & Passion" in 2006. Afterwards, the Soul of Virginia Magazine spotlighted the company as "Dancing to a New Beat in Virginia". And in 2005, Richmond Woman Magazine described King as "Coffee, Flowers and Ana, Colombia's Finest Exports". According to Dance Teacher Magazine, a widely read publication, the Latin Ballet of Virginia is one of only

three organizations in the United States that utilized dance to teach English as a Second Language. In the December 2007 issue of Southern Living Magazine, there was an article that talked about the educational programs that the Latin Ballet offered.

Amid many other awards, in 2010, the Richmond Region Magazine recognized Ana Ines King as the artist for Arts and Culture in Virginia 2010.

Each and every single award, prize, and nomination that both King and her organization have received, is clear evidence of how successful and amazing their work has been and the incredible impact it has on the community. And for King the community is the center of all things we do whatsoever. "Our community is an extension of our family and there is nothing more important than family", quotes King as a response to why it was important to make a difference in the community. "For me, the difference I get to make involves my greatest passion: dance!"

The Latin Ballet will continue to create performances and dances, provide classes, lectures, and demonstrations, and develop productions to make the hispanic culture visible and to provide a place to be as a family. "In this day and age, the Latin American community is

expanding, and we want to be ready for them and provide them with a warm place to be and share", expresses Zaira Pulido, the Development Director and important member of the Latin Ballet.

Coming soon, —October 24rd to 28th to be precise—the Latin Ballet has planned a glorious performance to laud 'El Dia de los Muertos', a traditional Mexican holiday that brings people together to remember and honor our loved ones who have unfortunately passed. "We have found that this Mexican tradition embraces all Latin American people, especially because it is an opportunity to remember our beloved and celebrate life through one of the most traditional Mexican festivities," Ms. Pulido tells, as these performance series have been intended to demonstrate and share the spirit of Latin American traditions that happen during this cold season while the US celebrates halloween.

Meanwhile, the Latin Ballet of Virginia has set up a list of future goals to grow their community, thus by thriving their administrative team and 'putting more hands into action' to accomplish their mission and dreams. A strategy the Latin Ballet has planned is to boost and reinforce the organization's presence in social media to reach out and expand to the public. "It means

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to thrive our community, make it bigger and give more options for the Latin American people who want to embrace their culture, know about their roots and find a place to feel welcomed and supported”. It is essential for the Latin Ballet overall, the ability, passion, and experience of the Founder, Ana Inés King, who embodies their main goal.

Eventually though, King has plans to study abroad to learn from the world’s best

choreographers about the most recent techniques in flamenco and Latin productions. In addition, King also intends on writing a book that includes drawings and photographs, with the purpose of sharing her most meaningful productions that she has created for the Latin Ballet, and with the hope that it will be used as part of multicultural education at schools and in home-schooler guides.

“I am so blessed that by sharing my culture and Love for dance, I can help others believe in themselves and be proud of who they are. Love, Passion and Pride is what makes our world a better place to live!” King says proudly, embracing her heritage, passions, and achievements over what she loves to do and caring for the well-being of others. “I want everyone to be proud of themselves!”.

—*Carly Morales*