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INSIDE PUBLICATIONS 3104 O STREET SACRAMENTO CA 95816

GET INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD



# Dancing With a Star

Instructor teaches locals to kick up their heels, salsa style

By Jocelyn Munroe

It's a soggy Saturday night in a nondescript West Sacramento office complex that should be deserted. But cars are streaming into the parking lot and people are painstakingly making their way through ankle-deep puddles to a bland white warehouse with steamed-up windows.

Inside, the reason becomes clear. On a dimly lit dance floor, spotlights pulse, white rope lights twinkle around poles and dozens of couples doing sexy salsa moves with names like the Hairbrush, the Coin Drop and the Sliding Door pack the dance space. A live salsa band is playing a syncopated beat, and rotating colored lights highlight dancers every few seconds.

Then the lights come up and everyone blinks like they're coming out of a cave into sunlight. A dark-haired woman with a 300-watt smile steps up to a microphone to friendly applause and welcomes them all to Yemayá Salsa's monthly dance party.

Emelie Andagan is in her element as the creative force and inspiration behind Yemayá Salsa, a nonprofit dance school in Curtis Park.

The daughter of a Filipino mom and an American Navy dad, Andagan grew up in the Philippines surrounded by an extended family of dancers. From the time she could walk, she took ballet and jazz lessons. Throughout her childhood, the talented little girl from a far-away tropical island hungered after and trained to reach the glamorous



Emelie Andagan is the creative force and inspiration behind Yemayá Salsa

pinnacle of dance success: becoming a Rockette in New York City. At age 16, Andagan was thrilled when she finally got a chance to go to New York with her family.

She showed up to audition at Radio City Music Hall with stars in her eyes. But she didn't even make it on stage. "You're too short," she was told bluntly before she was shown the door. Rockettes must be at least 5 feet 8 inches tall to join the troupe. The 5-foot-1 Andagan never had a chance.

Crestfallen and angry, she determined then and there, through bitter tears, that she'd show them. "I decided I'd have my own dance

company," she recalls. "Who needs the Rockettes?!"

It took her more years than she hoped, but since 2001 Andagan has had her own dance company, focusing on the popular, flirtatious Latin dance that began in Cuba. Yemayá is named for the African Yoruban mother and sea goddess.

Yemayá dance troupes have been on *Good Day Sacramento*, danced at Sacramento Kings games and performed for the Oakland Raiders during halftime. They attend all the area salsa congresses (gatherings of salsa dancers and instructors), often bringing home trophies and ribbons. Andagan's hundreds of devoted

students come from as far away as Amador County and Placerville to experience her special skill for teaching salsa in challenging but understandable classes. And nobody gets turned away for being too short.

Yemayá is a family affair. Andagan is assisted by her husband, Kevin, a state research analyst during the day who handles the business side of the dance school at nights and on weekends.

"This has always been my wife's dream, to have her own dance company

and school. I'm here to support my wife," he says. "I'm the person behind the scenes."

Andagan's daughter Cecilia, 17, and son Jay, 16, are both excellent dancers and often assist classes and perform with the dance teams. Baby Aaron is only 1, but no doubt he'll be dancing in a year or two.

Family friend and aerobics instructor Abraham Contreras is an integral part of Yemayá as well. "It's a family-oriented dance company," he says. "It's interesting to some. The culture. They want change. And

Neighbors continued on page 27

Neighbors continued from page 24

television has hyped it up so much.” But it’s the accessible teaching style that is most appealing to students. “There is no such thing as anyone who’s born dancing,” says Contreras comfortably.

The next day, Andagan is teaching a pattern to a ladies’ dance team in her light-filled Curtis Park studio.

There’s such passion, dedication and flash of gold lame shoes that you might think you were watching a practice session of *Dancing With the Stars* except for a few charming giveaways: A baby is set up in a play pen on the floor and his daddy is crooning to his infant child as mommy practices spins and slides. Cute little kids frolic in and out of the studio, and Andagan’s son Jay and friend Andrew occasionally breeze through the room, kicking out the dance routine with such excellent form and style that they threaten to put the ladies to shame.

But Andagan ignores the distractions. She cares only about getting her class better.

“Shimmy here, it’s your flamenco arms,” she says. She’s not thrilled with their performance.

“OK,” she sighs. “Let’s clean up a few things.”

They execute the routine again and again, growing sharper. Best of all is Andagan, who has the perfection of movement of a prima ballerina and the fluid sensuality of a Cuban street dancer. Finally, they form a Rockettes-style chorus line with arms on each other’s shoulders and legs kicking high. “Body roll and now we’re angled,” calls out their teacher, leading them through each step.

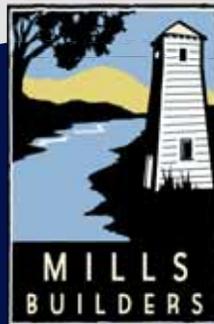
“We want sexy, *not* hoochie!” she says firmly.

Eat your heart out, Rockettes.

For more information, call 471-6508 or go to [yemayasalsa.com](http://yemayasalsa.com). •



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