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JP Kids: Award-winning dance group wows White House crowd

By REBEKAH MCKINNEY SOZER February 22, 2008

"We really can change lives for the better...when we teach and study the arts and humanities," concluded First Lady Laura Bush after Hyde Square's own Ritmo en Acción shook the White House Jan. 28 with a rousing salsa and a merengue so fast it would have left lesser dancers in the dust.

As usual, Ritmo youths did more than keep up. By winning a prestigious Coming Up Taller Award from the President's Committee on Arts and the Humanities and performing so beautifully on one of the highest stages in the land, they set a new standard for excellence among after school and out of school time arts programs in Boston, in Massachusetts and nationally.

"I'm always proud of what these kids accomplish, but I never saw them shine so brightly as they did that moment. I'm just thrilled to have been taken along for the ride," said their longtime instructor, Burju Hurturk of HYM Dance Company.

Brenda Rodriguez-Andújar, who has run the program since its beginnings, said of the performance, "It was an unforgettable experience to see the audience members in the White House in awe of what our youths can do. It just hits you what an amazing organization this is."

Ritmo en Accion is one of many innovative youth development programs of the Hyde Square Task Force, long a fixture on Centre Street. Through high-quality instruction and mentoring, youths enrolled there learn skills such as dance and, in the process, gain self-esteem. They also learn responsibility through community service projects.

Ritmo members like Raul Garcia, 17, teach younger youths the techniques and history of the Afro-Latin and contemporary dances they've mastered. He says of a young student, "He looks up to me. I try not to do the wrong thing so he won't follow me down the wrong path."

Their sense of purpose and pride in accomplishment carries over to their academic lives; one hundred percent of participating seniors have been accepted to college for the past three years.

Ritmo was a natural choice for a Coming Up Taller Award, which was conceived 10 years ago to recognize outstanding community programs that celebrate the creativity of youth, and provide them with opportunities to learn and contribute to their communities. The award includes a \$10,000 prize, which will be used to bolster the program.

Those who know the program seem to agree that Ritmo unleashes the potential of JP and Roxbury youths. During a reception to honor Ritmo, the other Massachusetts winner and two semi-finalists hosted by state Rep. Jeffrey Sánchez and the Massachusetts Cultural Council on Feb. 11, the Massachusetts Cultural Council's Mark Smith told of his visit to the Lincoln Memorial with Ritmo youth the day of the ceremony.

On the steps of the monument, dancer Katherine Lebron noticed the marker on the spot where Martin Luther King stood to deliver his iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. She stood on it and said, "I want to feel his power." Smith then took the spot, saying, "I want to feel her power."

The writer is on the staff of the Hyde Square Task Force.

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Courtesy Photo First Lady Laura Bush and President's Committee member Elizabeth Rubin (far left) present Brenda Rodriguez-Andujar, Ritmo program director, and Yariza Peña, Ritmo alumna, with the 2007 Coming Up Taller Award for excellence in arts and leadership development.

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