

In step, out of trouble

US awards teen dance program that promotes safety

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By Anna Badkhen, Globe Staff | January 28, 2008

For more than six years, teenagers in Boston have been learning the intense and graceful steps of Latin dance and teaching them to children as part of a local nonprofit's effort to keep youths off the city's streets.

Today, the Hyde Square Task Force will receive national recognition for its work to prevent violence and risky behavior among Boston children. During a White House ceremony this morning, Laura Bush is scheduled to present the group with the prestigious Coming Up Taller Award, which honors 15 arts and humanities nonprofit organizations annually for encouraging creativity in children in order to help steer them away from crime.

"This is beyond what I would call an honor for us," said Brenda Rodriguez-Andújar, who helped develop Ritmo en Acción - Spanish for "Rhythm in Action" - the youth program that teaches Latin dance, free of charge, to about 300 Boston youths each year.

Ritmo en Acción was started in 2001, when several activists at the Hyde Square Task Force started asking people in the neighborhood straddling the border between Jamaica Plain and Roxbury what kind of activity they wanted for their children.

"A lot of people talked about dance," recalled Chrismaldi Vasquez, one of the activists with the task force. Soon, the first six teenage members of Ritmo en Acción dance program were taking salsa lessons from Hacha Y Machete Dance Co., a Boston-based Latin dance troupe. After being trained by professionals, the teenagers, in turn, teach children at the John F. Kennedy Elementary School and the Mary E. Curley Middle School, and at a dance studio the task force operates in Jamaica Plain.

"It's not just a group of teens who learn dance and perform it: It's a whole cycle [that] steers them away from all the violence around them," Vasquez said. "It provides structure."

Ritmo en Acción has 15 to 20 members who are between 14 and 18 years old. The troupe has performed in Los Angeles and Paris, and will perform today at the White House.

"It's about using the arts and humanities to develop that discipline, that awareness, getting your life organized," said Kimber Craine, director of program initiatives at the President's Committee for the Arts and the Humanities, which oversees the award. "The arts and humanities, if you want to do them, you have to become disciplined, you have to become focused."

The Coming Up Taller Award comes with a \$10,000 prize, which the task force will use for its programs, said Rodriguez-Andújar. In addition to Ritmo en Acción, the organization runs programs to improve literacy, teach children how to become role models, and help students prepare for college.

Several teenage members of the task force recently asked the Boston public schools to reinstate required civics classes, a required course in the 1970s, for the city's high school students. The students said the classes were necessary to create an interest in politics and civic life among teenagers.

The importance of such work was crystallized again this month, said Rodriguez-Andújar, when a wave of deadly violence that swept through Boston killed one of the Hyde Square Task Force's former participants, 16-year-old Carlos Sierra of Dorchester. Sierra, who had attended a program that encourages teenagers to stay in school and prepare for college, was shot to death as he was walking home from a convenience store.

"This is our reason for being and doing the work that we do . . . to help combat these issues," said Rodriguez-Andújar. "The work we do is so crucial and so important to keep kids off the street, to give them a purpose, to get them involved, to help them see a bigger picture." ■