

MAD HOT BALLROOM

*Every dance has a story.
And every dancer does, too.
For the dancers at Einstein High
School entering the annual Latin
Dance Competition, it's a story in
search of a happy ending.*

By Archana Pyati | Photos by Lisa Helfert



Albert Einstein High School students Abrianna Rivera and William Martinez perform the cha-cha during Montgomery County Public Schools' annual Latin Dance Competition at The Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda.

IN A YOGA STUDIO at Kensington's Albert Einstein High School, Manuel Ramirez is guiding 20 of his classmates through elementary salsa steps. Over and over, they practice the basic, the side step, right and left turns in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror, above which hangs a sign bearing the "Seven Secrets of Super Performers."

"1-2-3, 5-6-7!" says Manuel, the group's de facto leader at age 18, as the teenagers swivel their hips in unison. He asks them to add a shoulder roll, and his counting picks up speed. Music blares from an iPod—a joyful mix of trombones and trumpets, percussive congas and syncopated piano. Everybody is concentrating on the moves, but Manuel insists they keep counting.

"I can't hear you!" he yells, walking around and adjusting elbows in line with chests. "Strong arms," he urges them, and each dancer strives for the perfect posture.

Perfection appears well within reach. It's late October and Titanes Salseros—the competitive dance team of Latin American Students United (LASU), an after-school club—has a legacy to uphold. They're the defending champions of Montgomery County Public Schools' annual Latin Dance Competition, held each fall at The Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda and now just a month away.

In 2012, Titanes Salseros—which combines a Latinized version of the school's team name, the Titans, with the Spanish word for "salsa dancers"—won six out of eight categories in the competition. The contest awards prizes in both group and individual couples dances, from salsa to bachata to merengue to the cha-cha. Since 2001, the group has earned 46 first-place trophies.

After the dancers finish their warm-up, Paula Però, an AP Spanish teacher and the group's adviser, asks them to



**"WE'RE NOT IN GANGS.
WE WANT TO BE PROFESSIONAL.
WE WANT TO BE SOMETHING ELSE."**

—MANUEL RAMIREZ, PICTURED IN CENTER, WITH SONIA RODRIGUEZ AND WILLIAM MARTINEZ

gather around in a circle. She reminds the dancers that they're counting on each other. They need to forgo video games and outings with friends, she says, and focus on dancing, homework and getting enough sleep.

"Even if you're at the back of that stage, people can see you," Però tells them. "Everybody on that stage matters."

IN THE DAYS THAT follow, the team practices its three-minute routine every weekday afternoon except Mondays, when Però has a standing meeting as chairwoman of Einstein's World Languages Department. Technically, practices run from 2:30 to 5 p.m., but the group often rehearses until 7 or later. Their weekends are devoted to dance, too.

"Most people see the performance,

but they don't see the process," Però says. Parents who fret about grades aren't always sympathetic to the dancers' relentless schedule. Some, she says, "think we're wasting time here."

Not that there's time to waste. The team will have to dance brilliantly, and the more experienced dancers will become choreographers as well, creating steps for all the routines. "Coreo," the kids call it.

"It's really stressful coming up with it," says senior William Martinez, 18, who'll compete in the group dance, cha-cha, the parent/student category and Jack and Jill, in which teens from competing high schools are paired for extemporaneous social dancing.

The students get to choose the music for the group routine, according to the After School Dance Fund, the nonprofit



Manuel Ramirez (left) and Sonia Rodriguez rehearse at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington.

that administers the competition. Titanes has selected an eclectic mix: “Yo No Pido,” a bachata by Dominican crooner Teodoro Reyes; “La Economía,” a hard-charging salsa about inequality by the now-defunct band La Excelencia; and a hip-hop number, “Menea Tu Chapa,” which roughly translates to “Wiggle Your Behind,” by Miami rapper Wilo D’New.

Dancers will be evaluated not only on their precision, stage presence and chemistry, but on whether they capture the essence of each dance style. Salsa, rooted in the Spanish melodies and African rhythms of Cuban *son*, should be energetic and precise; bachata, from the Dominican Republic, sensual and full of longing; merengue, originating in the Dominican and Haiti, flirtatious and frothy like its namesake, merengue; cha-cha, a Cuban ballroom dance, crisp and poised.

Manuel and the seven other varsity dancers draw inspiration from multiple sources: YouTube clips of professional *salseros* and *bachateros*; dance “congresses” that draw professionals and amateurs alike; and the alumni team, Einstein graduates who compete in their own category at Strathmore.

“Practice makes permanent,” Alicia Escoto tells the group one afternoon. A communications major at the University of Maryland, Escoto is a competition veteran at 20. “If you do it sloppily here, then you’ll do it sloppily that night,” she says.

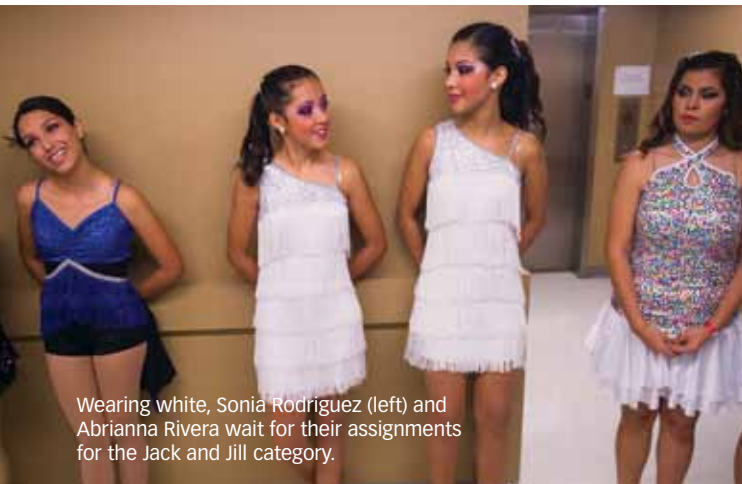
A few days later, the dancers explore formations they hope will appeal to the judges. After pulling up a dance formation app on her iPhone, Però suggests the group start the bachata in a “V” then transition to a “W” shape. This will allow the two less experienced couples to exit the

stage before the salsa, a complex and athletic number with multiple formations.

After running through the routine half a dozen times, the group breaks to snack on Halloween candy and watch themselves on Però’s iPad. “Are you together? Are your hands in the same place?” Però asks, reminding them that the devil is in the details.

The students call Però their “second mom,” and spend more time with her than their own mothers before competition. Fellow teachers marvel at the number of unpaid hours she spends not only at practice but chauffeuring students home afterward, to Westfield Wheaton mall to alter costumes and shop for accessories, and to Baja Fresh in Wheaton on Tuesday nights, when the restaurant donates a portion of its profits to Titanes.

Born in Argentina, Però, 36, gradu-



Wearing white, Sonia Rodriguez (left) and Abrianna Rivera wait for their assignments for the Jack and Jill category.



Members of Titanes Salseros warm up in their dressing room at Strathmore.

ated from Bethesda's Walter Johnson High School in 1995 and studied education at the University of Maryland. She signed on to be the LASU sponsor after being hired at Einstein in 2000, partly because her husband, Miguel, worked long hours as a chef. Thanks to a more reasonable schedule, Miguel now tags along to practices and occasionally cooks for Titanes and their parents.

Peró, who isn't a dancer herself, says the students raise the bar each year. "They're constantly pushing themselves," she says.

Will these kids someday be professional dancers? Probably not, Peró says. But they're learning how to be comfortable in their own skins and around members of the opposite sex. Titanes Salseros "teaches its members to respect one another," Peró says.

WHEN THE MUSIC'S playing, it's difficult for Manuel to stand still. Short and lithe with an understated Mohawk, Manuel takes charge as a dance lead in an assertive but never overpowering manner. A taskmaster during rehearsals, he's nonetheless quick with a joke or a hug.

Despite his intuitive feel for dance, Manuel grew up playing soccer and fixing computers instead. When he arrived from El Salvador at 15, he spoke only Spanish. At first, he, his sister, Susy, and his mother, Yolanda Dominguez, lived



Dance team adviser and Einstein teacher Paula Peró gives Manuel Ramirez a good-luck hug before the competition.

with his uncle's family in Wheaton. Manuel credits his uncle with keeping him away from the wrong crowd. "You're not going to be living with this family [if that happens]," he'd tell Manuel.

Manuel's cousin, Luis, an Einstein junior at the time, had recently joined LASU and invited Manuel to a workshop. Though he was dabbling in break dancing by then, Manuel was reluctant because everybody spoke English. But conversations with Luis and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes at Einstein helped, so he kept showing up at practices.

Three years later, Manuel scours the Internet for new choreography, down-

loads songs to his iPod and dances socially at Mr. Mambo's, a salsa club near his family's apartment in Silver Spring.

Of all the students, Manuel is the most vocal about changing attitudes about Latinos through dance. Having lived in Langley Park, a working-class town in Prince George's County that has struggled with gang violence, he's painfully aware of negative associations that persist.

"We're not in gangs," he says. "We want to be professional. We want to be something else."

In his hometown of Sonsonate, near El Salvador's western coast, Manuel's father, a police officer, would take him to crime scenes, showing him corpses to illustrate the reality of bad choices. His father remains in Sonsonate, while Dominguez, 42 and now divorced, focuses on building a new life here with Manuel and Susy, 14.

Dancing, she says, has positively shaped Manuel's character. "I'm proud," she says. "When we came here, our point was to become a better family."

A caregiver for an elderly woman, Dominguez wants Manuel to attend college. He admits that school is not his strong suit; he was disqualified from Titanes for two quarters one year because he didn't make the minimum 2.0 quarterly grade point average set by Peró. He promises to try harder, then adjures: "No, I'm not going to *try* to do better. I am going to *do* better."

Titanes Salseros performs a group dance for the competition's "Best in Show" category.



AN HOUR BEFORE THE LIGHTS DIM, EVERY SEAT IN THE AUDITORIUM, INCLUDING THE BALCONIES, FILLS UP. AND FINALLY THE COMPETITION BEGINS.

AT A SUNDAY BRUNCH prepared by Miguel Peró for the dancers and their families a few weeks before competition, Sonia Rodriguez's siblings are talking about how much they've missed her since she joined Titanes Salseros. Franky, 11, and 7-year-old twins Kathy and Fernando remember when Sonia, 16, had time to play. Now she's either studying or at practice. She even skipped trick-or-treating on Halloween.

Sonia almost didn't join Titanes Salseros the previous year because her friends dismissed the group as "chanchi"—a slur similar to "wetback." But once she tasted victory at a Dominion High School dance competition in Sterling, Va., Sonia was hooked. She has since "let go of those friends."

When her family moved from San Salvador to Maryland in 2002, Sonia spoke no English and cried constantly during the first two weeks of kindergarten. Now, like her bicultural peers, she replies in English to her Spanish-speaking mom and has adopted a typical American after-school schedule, pre-

viously packed with karate, swimming and cheerleading, now with field hockey and dance.

Her parents support her extracurriculars as long as she keeps getting A's and B's. "I always tell her, '*Darlo major*,'" says her mother, Margarita Batres, 38. *Give it your best.*

Sonia's father, Francisco Rodriguez, 39, has worked as a mechanic for 12 years and still puts in 11-hour days, six days a week, to make all this possible for his family. He and Batres were attending college in El Salvador when Sonia was born, but had to drop out—a choice they're determined Sonia won't face.

"I want her to have a future," Rodriguez says.

For similar reasons, William's parents, Ana Mercado and Daniel Martinez, risked their lives crossing Central America and Mexico for the U.S., leaving Ilobasco, a town in El Salvador known more for its meticulously crafted clay figurines than for its economic opportunities.

Martinez came first, and Mercado

followed, leaving William behind with her mother for four years while she and her husband established themselves in Wheaton. When William joined his parents at 9, he entered the U.S. without documents. But he was recently accepted into the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, which protects him from deportation and allows him to apply for a Social Security number, driver's license and work permit.

"The idea was for William to have more opportunities," says Martinez, a 40-year-old construction superintendent.

Their son's long hours with Titanes have caused friction within the family. But Mercado, 35, and Martinez concede that dance has given their shy son confidence. An aspiring architect/engineer, William always excelled in school, but acknowledges he "had such a hard time talking to people."

Titanes has changed that. He got a girlfriend—his dance partner, Abrianna Rivera, 15—though they recently broke up. "You gain this skill, and it's something I can have for the rest of my life," he says.

COMPETITION IS A WEEK away. Rehearsal on this Saturday has been moved to Einstein's spacious dance studio on the third floor. Però has invited a friend, local flamenco teacher Alisa Bernstein, to critique the group routine and the individual couples' dances. The dancers are in for an 11-hour day.

"Menea Tu Chapa," a purposefully "ridiculous" dance, as Bernstein puts it, requires attention. A part toward the end—16 counts in which the dancers aren't doing much—needs fixing. Bernstein says she's looking for "organized disorder," choreographed moves that look improvised.

"Give some moves, people!" Bernstein shouts. Together, she and the students devise a solution: The girls shake their hips and point flirtatiously toward the boys, clustered in the middle. The boys jump and shake their hips rhythmically until it's time for them to perform their final "tricks"—lifts, dips and flips—with the girls, moves intended to elicit shrieks from the audience more than points from the judges. The group practices the new choreography half a dozen times.

"I know you guys are tired, but I need to see some energy!" Bernstein yells.

For the next hour, they practice tricks that demand strength, coordination and balance. Bernstein still isn't satisfied. "You need to come out of the trick at the same time!" she demands, and eventually they do. The group spends the next few hours polishing entrances and exits, a luxury that comes with having the routine's major choreography done.

Meanwhile, the couples continue to work furiously to finish their dances. The day before, William and Abrianna practiced for an hour on an ending for "Let's Get Loud," a Jennifer Lopez hit that comes in the second half of their cha-cha routine.

Finally it's the Sunday before competition. Manuel and Sonia arrive at Einstein early to revise their salsa with steps that Manuel picked up the night before at Mr. Mambo's. Zafire, a globe-trotting



The dance team poses with its collection of trophies after the awards ceremony.

dance team from the Bronx that Titanes members revere, was conducting a workshop there. As new partners, Manuel and Sonia also spend the morning working on their personal connection.

Then in the final hours of the rehearsal, Manuel practices the bachata with Hlina Mitku, an 18-year-old junior from Ethiopia. Manuel and Hlina joined Titanes the same afternoon, and the rapport they've built over three years as dance partners is readily apparent. They want to challenge themselves with a trick—Manuel flipping Hlina—and they practice until they're exhausted but get it right.

"Remember, the judges are looking for good dancing," Però tells them. "They're not just looking for tricks."

COMPETITION DAY ARRIVES on an overcast Monday, and Titanes Salseros has converted Einstein's first-floor art gallery into a command center. Alumni dancers Johanna Orellana, 21, and Karen Carbajal, 23, are applying hot pink and lavender eye shadow on the girls and setting braids with copious amounts of hair spray.

"What if I mess up and we lose because of me?" asks Krissia Osorio, 16, who'll partner with Jovan Aquino, 17, in all three group dances today.

"No," Karen says firmly. "You've got to show that you own it, that 'no one's better than me.'"

After lunch, Titanes Salseros boards a bus to Strathmore. They set up in a

dressling room, passing the hours until the competition by stretching, running through their routines and playing UNO.

Students from competing high schools arrive, keeping to themselves except for Watkins Mill's team, Las Olas, which drops by to wish Titanes good luck. "I'm afraid of Watkins Mill," Manuel confides. "They always have something to give to the audience."

An hour before the lights dim, every seat in the auditorium, including the balconies, fills up. And finally the competition begins with individual couples' dances: first cha-cha, then merengue, bachata and salsa. For each category, couples first crowd the stage and perform their routines simultaneously to the same music, selected by the After School Dance Fund. Then, each couple dances alone in a 20-second spotlight before the judges, who assign them a numerical score.

The cha-cha contestants dance first, and William and Abrianna's moves are fluid, their turns crisp and their steps synchronized. A difficult dance to make exciting due to its leisurely tempo, the cha-cha begs for hamming it up, which William and Abrianna do in their spotlight.

Next, the merengue performers take the stage. Hlina and Levi Dias, a 16-year-old Brazilian, compete for Einstein. Offstage, both teens are introverts; onstage, they unleash all the extroversion the merengue requires. They execute their steps joyfully, oozing confidence through bright smiles.

The *bachateros* follow, with Hlina and Manuel demonstrating all the passion of reuniting lovers. Hlina nails the flip while Manuel seduces the audience with his moves.

Finally, the salsa dancers take the stage. Manuel and Sonia's routine is stylish and complex, full of double- and triple-turns, shoulder shimmies and other "shines," or clever footwork. The chemistry they've been working hard to establish comes through.

The final dance before intermission is the parent/student category, in which contestants test their dancing skills with brave and willing adults. On a stage full of intergenerational couples, William and Abrianna's mother, Glenda Bonilla, 39, dance their way through a rapid succession of songs.

After intermission, Einstein is third up among the nine schools competing in everyone's favorite category, "Best in

Show," the group dance division. Titanes' performance far surpasses the energy of rehearsals. "Yo No Pido" is bouncy and audacious; "La Economía," brassy and precise; "Menea Tu Chapa," as irreverent as dance coach Bernstein demanded. The audience goes wild during the boys' salsa solo, full of flashy footwork and hand gestures, precise head snaps and bravado.

Before they learn how they did with the judges, though, there are the alumni and Jack and Jill divisions. For Jack and Jill, couples dance while judges watch from the back of the stage, tapping couples on the shoulder to eliminate them. William, Abrianna and their respective partners are the last two couples eliminated before Manuel and Seneca Valley High School senior Allison Murillo are declared the winners.

Then Ricardo Loaiza, executive director of the After School Dance Fund, announces Einstein as the winner in

the cha-cha, merengue and salsa categories. It's hard to imagine the night getting any better—but it does. Titanes Salseros wins the most anticipated prize of the evening: first place in Best in Show.

The team erupts, everyone reaching to touch the giant trophy Manuel holds aloft. The alumni, too, beat out their competition.

After posing for photos, the dancers make their way back to the dressing room to clean up. "It hasn't hit me yet," says Levi, who can't stop smiling.

"It's what happens when you practice," Manuel says matter-of-factly. "I feel happy because that's what we came for."

As they make their way to the bus, the teenagers wonder aloud where at Einstein they'll put all their trophies. ■

Archana Pyati is a writer living in Silver Spring. To comment on this story, email comments@bethesdamagazine.com.



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