

# South Tucson Studio Keeps Kids Dancing

By Veronica Cruz

It all started with a simple dance step and a \$5 bet.

At a Memorial Day barbecue a couple of years ago, Joseph Rodgers, a professional ballet dancer and instructor, offered a friend's son a few dollars if he could master an easy step he's taught scores of children.

Other kids began to pour out of the house, eager to learn the move and soon Rodgers was teaching tendus and pliés, classic ballet steps, to a group of 40 kids gathered in the middle of a south side neighborhood street.

It was then that Rodgers realized "these kids are hungry for this."

Rodgers, 46, and wife Soleste Lupu, 44, have been feeding those hungry souls and enriching the lives of south side youth since they opened the doors to their non-profit dance studio, Dancing in the Streets Arizona, 2302 S. Fourth Ave., in August 2008.

The couple is committed to providing a creative outlet in a community where performing arts programs are almost non-existent.

"I'm just trying to reclaim this side of town," Rodgers said. "I think it's been in the dark too long."

Having grown up in the South Park neighborhood, Rodgers is all too familiar with the pressures that youth face, adding that little has improved since he has been away for more than two decades.

"It's the same crack, same prostitution, same poverty," he said.

Rodgers began studying ballet at age 7 at the Tucson Academy of Dance with Maria Morton, who offered him a full scholarship after meeting him through an outreach program at St. Ambrose School. Tucson Academy of Dance also brought Rodgers and Lupu together for the first time, where they both studied with Morton and began dating as teenagers, eventually breaking up and re-connecting 12 years ago.

Ballet helped Rodgers stay out of the trouble his friends fell into and opened up a world of possibilities a child from his side of town never thought possible. Still, he heard the same discouraging words over and over, "a black man from the south side would never make it; you'll never leave Tucson," he recalled.

Rodgers proved himself when he earned a scholarship to the San Francisco Ballet School while

attending Catalina Magnet High School. Although he ultimately got kicked out of the program, he continued practicing ballet and has since performed with companies across the country, including Ballet Arizona, Ballet Chicago, Arizona Dance Theater, Feld Ballet New York and the Milwaukee Ballet.

Despite a successful career, the pressures of the "hood" came back to haunt him.

Rodgers experimented with drugs and served a six-month prison sentence for forging checks in the 1980s.

While in prison, Rodgers subscribed to dance magazines, continued to practice his technique and listened to classical music in his cell.

"Every time I got in trouble, I always had ballet to fall back on," he said.

Rodgers and Lupu hope that ballet can help kids in similar circumstances become exposed to something positive, and are working toward eliminating stereotypes involving gender, race, body issues and economic status associated with ballet by making it accessible to everyone.

"We're getting people to think outside the box of their own limitations," Lupu said.

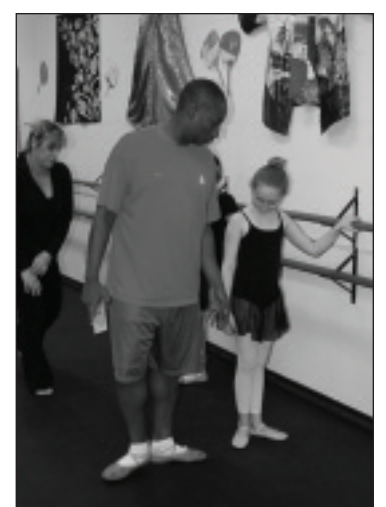
Erasing those limitations involves boosting kids' confidence and self-esteem, said Lupu, who along with Rodgers encourage the students to leave their inhibitions and fears outside the ballet studio. They always tell their students "I can't, doesn't exist."

Lupu says she has seen students struggle with steps and continuously encourages them to keep trying, until they eventually master them. She believes that building confidence will help her students in all aspects of their lives.

"Once they learn a pas de chat, suddenly math class isn't quite so scary," Lupu said. "If you feel that you can accomplish anything and that you have value, then really anything you decide to do will be achievable."

In lieu of gifts at their March wedding, the couple asked for donations for their dance studio. With this help, Dancing in the Streets Arizona has grown to include nearly 60 students from diverse backgrounds and all parts of Tucson, from 3-year-olds to adults.

Rodgers and Lupu offer classes at a low cost, \$59 for eight classes, held once a week, and give full



PHOTOS BY NYSSA BACA

**TOP:** Joseph Rodgers teaches ballet to his students (front to back) Veronica Valenzuela, 11, Jane Bendickson, 9, Rebecca Gjertsen, 10, Teagan Anderson, 9, Lizbeth Oquita, 9, and Vanessa Cardenas, 9.

**BOTTOM LEFT:** Soleste Lupu helps her student Jane Bendickson, 9, during ballet class.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Joseph Rodgers teaches ballet to student Teagan Anderson, 9, at the Mo Sun Art and Wellness Center in South Tucson.

scholarships to students who can't afford to pay for classes. Through a generous donation of ballet shoes and leotards from Danswest Dance Productions, another Tucson dance school, Lupu is also able to provide these supplies to families who are unable to purchase them.

For one of the families, a pair of donated ballet slippers and a leotard were the first new items their daughter had ever owned in her life, Lupu said.

Often Rodgers will pick up children from their homes if they do not have a ride to class and will

make house visits if a student unexpectedly misses class.

In December, students performed "Baile en el Cascanueces" (The Nutcracker) to a sold-out audience at the Berger Performing Arts Center and are currently working on their June production of "A Midsummer's Night Dream."

Lizbeth Oquita, 9, danced four different parts in "Baile en el Cascanueces" and couldn't wait to start practicing for the June recital.

"I felt nervous," she said. "But when I was on stage I didn't feel nervous anymore, I wanted to

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Dancing in the  
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keep dancing."

For many of the students this was their first time performing on stage in front of an audience. They continued practicing their routines and listening to the music, even after the performance was over, Rodgers said.

"Once you have that stage high, a drug high doesn't match it," Rodgers said.

## New Binational Effort on Border Offers Aid, Education

### Jesuit groups work together to raise awareness

By Lourdes Villarreal

A new binational organization will provide services to migrants while educating, researching and advocating on critical border and immigration issues.

Launched in January, the Kino Border Initiative (KBI) is a collaborative effort by various Catholic groups in Arizona, California and Mexico and will serve as an umbrella organization for a variety of activities revolving around border concerns.

Through existing and new programs, KBI will assist Mexican migrants deported from the United States, host educational efforts on

the reality of migration, and create opportunities for research and advocacy.

"One of the components of the Kino Border Initiative," said the Rev. Sean Carroll, executive director of KBI, "is direct service to deportees by providing food, clothing and pastoral support."

The ministry assists people deported from the United States through the Aid Center for Deported Migrants or Centro de Atencion para los Migrantes Deportados (CAMDEP) in Nogales, Sonora.

Across the street from CAMDEP, the eight-bed Casa Nazareth Women's Shelter serves unaccompanied women and children.

Another mission of the cross-border initiative is to educate residents in the border area on the

“ (The Kino Border Initiative) is something beyond the borders.

—Rev. Peter Neeley

Director, KBI Education Project

realities of migration through community and parish workshops and other educational events.

In addition, based on the needs of deportees, KBI will fund research on migration and the US-Mexico border. The project will provide space for visiting scholars to conduct research along the bor-

der and to engage in advocacy efforts as appropriate, he said.

Six Catholic groups came together to form the project: the Diocese of Tucson, the Archdiocese of Hermosillo in Sonora, the Jesuit Refugee Service U.S.A., the California Providence of the Society of Jesus, the Mexican Providence of the Society of Jesus, and the Missionary Sisters of the Eucharist, a congregation in Colima, Mexico.

Jesuits from the United States originally presented this idea to the church as a binational service to provide education about migration and Catholic social teaching, Carroll said.

The KBI programs are designed to help people understand the consequences of border policies and to promote solidarity

among people affected by border policies.

The project is named after Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, a Jesuit priest who founded many missions in southwestern North America, in what is now northern Sonora, Southern California, and Southern Arizona.

"We took his name because he is one of the most recognized of the European missionaries," said the Rev. Peter Neeley, director of the KBI education project, and "was the first Jesuit to explore this area."

While KBI is Jesuit-led, it is not a religious organization, Neeley said, but rather, a non-profit social service and they welcome — and need — volunteers from all paths.

In all respects, KBI "is something beyond the borders," he said.