



ABOVE: From left, Vanessa Hernandez, Mia Ruiz, Mia's sister Maria, Valeria Ponce, and Stefanie Saenz, all of Toledo, rehearse at the Toledo Heights branch of the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library. CENTER: Alex Ponce of Toledo practices with Elaina Hernandez. RIGHT: Marcus Flynn and Analicia Sanchez, both of Toledo, chat before a performance.

Dancing for Joy

Troupe celebrates Mexican heritage

BLADE PHOTOS BY
JETTA FRASER



Lawrencia Leroux and Karina Sanchez are dancers of El Corazon de Mexico Ballet Folklorico.

By SALLY VALLONGO
SPECIAL TO THE BLADE

With swirling skirts, flashing swords, and the tappity-tap of lightning-quick dance shoes, members of El Corazon de Mexico Ballet Folklorico will help kick off Cinco de Mayo today at the Toledo Zoo.

From 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Main Plaza, this young but acclaimed company will alternate on stage with another local Mexican dance company and DJ Tony Rios. There will be crafts for all ages and other activities, plus, of course, savory foods, for this annual celebration.

May 5 marks a military victory by Mexico's army over invading French troops in the port state of Vera Cruz more than 150 years ago. But today, Cinco de Mayo is largely a celebration of Mexican heritage and pride in the United States and around the world.

No one at today's event will be more proud than Elaina Hernandez, founder of El Corazon, a Mexican American who has defined her career as a traditional dance advocate.

"It's a labor of love," said Ms. Hernandez, talking about her full-time work as historian, teacher, choreographer, and producer for her energetic company. Her dancers range from age 6 to 22. Admission is by invitation and participation is free.

As a young girl, Ms. Hernandez discovered

the charm of the varied and complex dances, music, and costume styles representing many of Mexico's 31 states. Natural talent and innate perseverance propelled her to the area's oldest group, Ballet Folklorico Imagenes Mexicanas, where she became director at age 15.

Ever the traditionalist, Ms. Hernandez, a 31-year-old mother of three, began to delve into original dances handed down in the time-honored method of one director to another.

In 1996, she started her own group, El Corazon, where she also still dances, sometimes with her husband, Ivis. Her dances represent the distinct styles of Mexican states including Vera Cruz, Jalisco, Sinaloa, Chiapas, Colima, and Chihuahua, as well as the beloved Mexican Hat Dance.

It's a real family affair, with Mr. Hernandez's father, Raymond Soto, as manager and chief babysitter and her mother, Amalia Hernandez, as costumiere. "I couldn't do the things I do without having a family like mine," said Elaina, who last year received an award for service to the Hispanic community during the annual Diamante event.

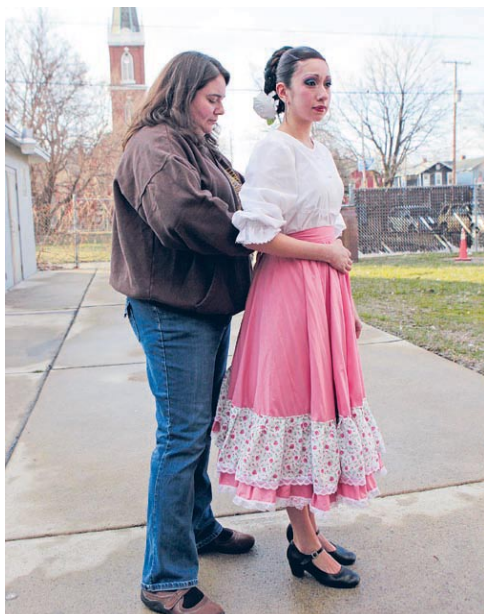
Today's appearances kick off a busy, busy week for Ms. Hernandez and her dancers, with appearances scheduled at area schools, hospitals, restaurants, and parties.

Contact Sally Vallongo at
svallongo@theblade.com.



ABOVE: Ashley Viveros of Temperance discusses dancing assignments with troupe director Elaina Hernandez, right.

LEFT: Hugo Ramirez of Toledo.



Toledoan Elaina Hernandez, left, adjusts the skirt of dancer Karina Sanchez, also of Toledo.



Christopher Torres, Jr., of Toledo gets help from his father, Christopher Torres, Sr., before a performance.



At right, Armando Deanda of Toledo dances with Valeria Ponce, also of Toledo.