

Dancing with Grace to a Latin Beat

By Deirdre Venturella

Grace Badillo embodies what we should all be; a role model. Her work as a Latin dance teacher and dancer is only a part of who she is. Her generous nature moves her toward philanthropic work with both zeal and great focus.

A first generation New Yorican, Grace felt the desire to dance at an early age. Her mother's appreciation for dance led her to bring Grace to take Ballet lessons at the age of four. Grace wanted to dance Ballet, but the classes were too large and the teacher was not a very good communicator, leaving her frustrated. As she grew up Grace worked as a professional model and became a Certified Salsa Instructor through the University of Salsa in Puerto Rico (there are only around 35 certified teachers in the world).

Drawing from her considerable musical and vocal talents, Grace played piano for a 16-piece orchestra named La Predilecta and was performing often. She wrote music and poetry, sang for performances, and went out dancing in the evenings. Her independent spirit brought her to Maryland, setting out to fulfill her dreams. Soon Grace was teaching salsa at a local Latin dance club. One evening a Latin dance teacher from Puerto Rico named Hugo walked up to her and asked her to dance salsa. Right away they danced together perfectly, never missing a beat. Neither did their relationship; they were engaged to be married ten months later. It didn't take Hugo long to discover what motivated Grace, and it wasn't money or fame. The very next day after meeting Hugo, Grace was offered a singing contract to become a Latin pop singer. Her contract was to make her a big-time singer in a market that was looking for the next superstar. Many young singers would have jumped at the chance, and Grace had been considering moving to

Miami. Hugo encouraged her to sign the contract, but Grace wasn't sure her heart would be in it. The lifestyle she would lead seemed too hectic, just not for her. After declining to sign the contract Grace was happy with her decision. Her path was meant to bring her elsewhere. She didn't feel she was hiding her light under a basket, either. She just wanted to decide for herself where to shine.

In 2000 Grace and Hugo opened a dance studio, Dancing with Grace Productions, Inc., in the Baltimore, MD area so they could offer Salsa, Cha-Cha, Bachata and Merengue classes. Grace's teaching style embraced her personal philosophy of humility. Inflated egos and popularity contests are rampant in the dance teaching field, including the Latin dance sector, but Grace had always avoided all of that. Her belief is that the trust of the student is based on the humbleness of the teacher, and that teachers must understand that each student may learn differently. Some students are visual, some aural. Some learn by watching the teacher's movements, others may need to hear the counting to follow the music. Some dancers like to use imagery to learn, some like to write down the moves on paper. Grace believes that being sensitive to the students' individual needs separate the best teachers from the mediocre ones. Grace also guides dancers to take solid technique and put their individual personality into it. This avoids becoming a 'cookie cutter' dancer. The self-expression is fuller; the joy of dancing becomes more complete, translating into wonderful results. Grace calls her dynamic system of teaching the Dancing With Grace (DWG) method.

Grace and Hugo began working for worthy causes together. Their community work included offering Latin dance programs and events at local charter schools. Children that may

have little exposure to the Arts were learning to dance, with their parents joining in the fun and bonding with them in a special way. The children came away with more confidence and self-esteem. In an era when hours of isolation in front of computers destroy social skills, youngsters were learning patience and how to respect their partner. Even children at risk of being suspended from school benefited. Their behavior changed during dance class, proving the need of a creative outlet. During Hispanic Heritage Month each year many local schools book Dancing with Grace (DWG) for workshops and demonstrations. DWG is often called on to participate in community events such as Lockheed Martin's "Diversity Day", the National Hispanic Heritage Stamp Dedication Ceremony, and more. Grace never thought of these events as a way to 'plug' her studio. Her charitable nature had been seeking ways to share her talents with the community and help those in need.

She also noticed a need to be filled in the dance teaching world. After viewing numerous videos on Latin dancing, Grace and Hugo couldn't help but notice the lack of quality instruction on some videos. They saw cheaply produced videos with rough dancers pushing their partner around, some with the dancers' feet and hands cut off from view. Other obvious mistakes were teachers not breaking down movements, or not going over the foundations properly- if at all. In one video the men were taught everything while nothing was taught to the ladies. Worst of all, that same video had very advanced moves on an intermediate level tape, which can be dangerous. Feeling that people were being cheated, Grace made up her mind to produce her own salsa dance instruction DVDs. The quality couldn't be compromised, so Grace and Hugo invested in top-notch music and production. They would also exhibit Grace's philosophy

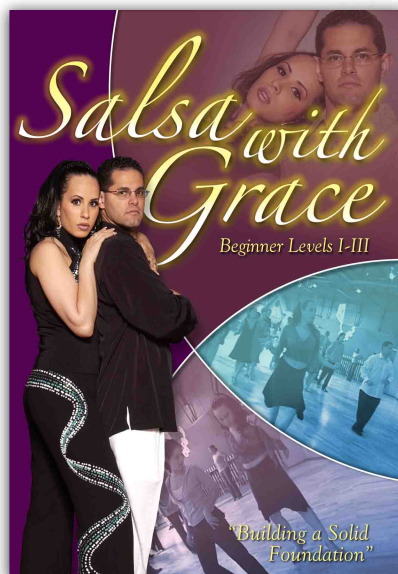
of teaching that kept in mind how dancers learn in different ways and need to keep their individuality. A count bar containing the eight bars to salsa would be displayed. The often-ignored foundational movements would be given step-by-step. And the music would need to be at two tempos; slower for practice and then at the faster tempos similar to what is heard at salsa clubs.

Some of the "Salsa with Grace" DVDs are now available, and the feedback has been very positive. Grace and her husband Hugo are both Certified Salsa Instructors, and their instruction is authentic and vibrant. And in typical Grace style, the motivation for producing DVDs was never money. The salsa DVD series will help finance a global mission through the Angel Network to help the sometimes forgotten Latino poor and homeless. Grace is currently preparing a campaign to match up older adoptable children with families since they are not often adopted, and wants to help give grants to families seeking to adopt. Grace and Hugo also plan to open their home and adopt a child.

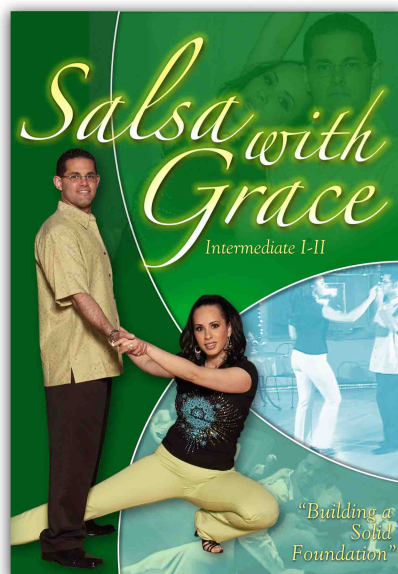
Today Grace keeps busy living out her dreams with Hugo, the love of her life. They teach and perform with their teaching staff at DWG. She still manages to find time for hobbies, painting, scrapbooking and playing the piano. She is a published author; her poetry can be found in *The International Who's Who in Poetry*, Copyright ©2004. For all her successes, Grace is still as humble as ever. She feels that her talents were given to her so she could use them to give something back to the world, and encourages everyone to do the same, to be a role model to all. As she would put it, "We have a purpose bigger than ourselves".

Contact Grace and Hugo Badillo, or order their instructional DVDs at:

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Salsa with Grace Instructional DVD Beginner Levels I-III



Salsa with Grace Instructional DVD Intermediate Levels I-II