

Dance instructor blesses Haley vets with 'Christmas in July'

By Joyce McKenzie, Times Correspondent

Friday, July 29, 2016 4:38pm

TAMPA — In dance, as in many other aspects of life, Grace Badillo believes it matters not if your feet are badly blistered or of no use at all.

"I have seen dance do amazing things for people's hearts, minds, bodies and spirits," said Badillo, an award-winning dance instructor and president of Dancing with Grace Productions, an enterprise focused mainly on Latin America-style moves, including salsa.

Her philosophy on dancing recently played out at the sixth annual Christmas in July celebration for residents of Haley's Cove, a nursing home for men and women ages 55 and older on the James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital campus in Tampa.

As in past years, Badillo — who received the National Presidential Volunteer Service Award given by former President George W. Bush in 2008 — helped coordinate the party for the purpose of engaging the military veterans in an afternoon of musical entertainment and dancing at the on-campus Flamingo Way Cafe.

"I have a really big place in my heart for veterans, and I love to serve people who wouldn't have the opportunity to get out," Badillo said. "I don't like seeing them depressed, and I don't want them to be forgotten."

Willie Matos, a retired New York City police officer who helped in the rescue efforts after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, served as DJ. The Antonio Congatone Veterans Ensemble played a number of musical arrangements while several young women from dance studios throughout the Tampa Bay area performed some fancy footwork with men in wheelchairs who seemingly mesmerized by their dance partners' spinning abilities and slick arm and hip movements.

Emcees were radio personality Monchy Esquea and retired VA nurse practitioner Sandra Flores, who many years ago founded and orchestrated the Christmas in July event as an afternoon social prior to Badillo coming on board and adding the entertainment component.

Ann Poonkasem, a former Miss Tampa and current Miss National Patriot, turned out in her tiara to sing Christmas carols as she held hands with and swirled around the chairs of a number of adoring veterans.

"Being able to see those who've given of themselves and sacrificed so much for us is why I'm here to support them," Poonkasem said.

Moreover, a handful of young students in Sybil Smith's Happy Hip Hoppers dance class in Lutz gathered around the veterans to perform their own high-spirited dance routine.

Smith's sons Blake, 12, and Brock, 8, were among them.

"I like to talk to people and wanted to talk to these men about what they have done," Blake said.



Photo by JOYCE MCKENZIE

Ann Poonkasem, a former Miss Tampa and current Miss National Patriot, partners with Army veteran Bill Moccio.

Nine-year-old Hailey Collier viewed the experience in a somewhat different light.

"I wanted to be here to make them happy because they have been through wars," she said.

The affair was held in partnership with the Life Enrichment Center, a nonprofit organization in north Tampa, whose mission is dedicated to serving seniors through the engagement of the arts. With the support of donations from the Lutz Woman's Club, the group presented Haley's Cove residents with personal name-embroidered canvas tote bags filled with art supplies and toiletries.

A portion of the money raised also helped cover the cost of some of the performers' costumes and provide a small stipend to the musicians to pay for their gas and other minor expenses.

"This event means everything to us because there is no way we can show our vets enough how much we care about them," said LEC director Maureen Murphy. "We couldn't think of a better way because you never know if they'll make it until Christmas."

Geoffrey Parker, a 91-year-old veteran of World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, attended for the second consecutive year.

"This is a great experience. It's lively, and everyone enjoys it. And I think the girls who organize this thing work their butts off," he said.

His sister, Sharon Hepburn, who was by his side, agreed.

"They go all out for these guys. They really do," she said. "It makes me want to cry that so many other veterans are just left to vegetate."

One fellow veteran they especially enjoyed watching this year was Jeff Wagner, a paraplegic cancer survivor and former Iron Man athlete, who in his wheelchair joined Badillo and Katherine Alexandria to perform a rousing routine on the dance floor.

"I came to entertain because I wanted to show them that they, too, could dance," Wagner said. "It's a wonderful experience, and I'm happy to be a part of it."

Badillo noted that during their practice sessions together she would tell Wagner, "We are going to dance a blessing over you and love will come."

And sure enough. Shortly thereafter he met and fell head over heels for Mary Lukes, a woman who belongs to his church.

Contact Joyce McKenzie at hillsnews@tampabay.com.

Dance instructor blesses Haley vets with 'Christmas in July' 07/29/16
Photo reprints | Article reprints

© 2016 Tampa Bay Times

160

Tweet

160



Commenting Guidelines



Abuse Policy

SPONSORED CONTENT