

San Francisco Chronicle

## Ballet Hispanico dance company teaches, promotes diversity

February 1, 2019 – Whitney Downard

San Francisco Chronicle

MERIDIAN, MISS. As a special education teacher for Northeast Lauderdale High School, Jennifer Moore knows the value of exposing her students to new experiences. "It's always great

to have the opportunity for students to learn about something they've never done — whether it's a new culture or a new dance," Moore said. "It's educational to experience something new and different." New York City-based dance company, Ballet Hispanico, delivered that exposure on Monday with a small assembly for students in the special education programs at Lauderdale County schools. ADVERTISING inRead invented by Teads "I thought it was great. I have students who like to dance and like music," Moore said. "You never know what some of them are going to like until you expose them to it. You never know what they are going to do as a profession... Having a disability doesn't mean you can't do anything you want to." YOUR ALL ACCESS SUBSCRIPTION IS WAITING! Enjoy 92% off your first month of digital access when you finish signing up today. SUBSCRIBE NOW #READLOCAL Eight dancers performed various dances, blending traditional Spanish movements with contemporary choreography, from Spain to Mexico to Cuba. The entire company includes 13 dancers but eight came to the school performance. "The choreographers all come from different places. Each of the choreographers brought their cultures and styles with them," Chris Bloom, a dancer from Virginia, said to the students. Continuing after Bloom, Johan Rivera, the rehearsal director with the company and emcee for Monday's performance, added, "Dance is a way to express ourselves. We don't have to say a word — you can just use a movement." Following the performance, a middle school

student rolled her wheelchair as close to Rivera as possible, thanking him for "The best day ever" and gushing about physical movements of the dancers. "Maybe someday you'll be able to join us," Rivera told her. "And thank you so much for coming." This push for people of all abilities, cultures or backgrounds to enjoy dance embodies the mission of Ballet Hispanico, which tours and performs throughout the world. "As a community, we work together with acceptance and learning from everyone... Our experiences and path to get there is different but we are the same," Rivera said. "In some places there's a lack of Hispanic representation but even in places where they are, there's the idea that what we are is yummy food... Coming from Puerto Rico, I know the way I see culture has shifted and I have enriched my culture (because) people have added so many different elements." For Rivera, sharing the various Spanish-speaking cultures from around the world connected everyone to a bigger picture, sharing music and rhythms everyone could enjoy. "Everyone connects with music — whether they know how to dance to it or not," Rivera said. "I think that it opens doors — whether or not someone cannot express themselves or if they express themselves in a different way... We say that in Ballet Hispanica, our spine is education and our heart is dance. Because we're not just sharing experiences through dance but we're educating through dance." This company focus on sharing a love for the arts not just through performances on big stages but also through intimate showcases inspired Dennis Sankovich, the executive director for the Mississippi State University Riley Center, to invite the dance company to Meridian. "We chose them because of their outreach," Sankovich said. "I saw them in NYC and we talked about their outreach and that's what sold me." The company specifically curates programs designed to teach and share new cultural experiences, which Sankovich said complemented the mission of the Riley Center. "They're really very, very prepared to do this for the students," Sankovich said. "I'm looking for professional companies that have done extensive outreach." In addition to the Monday performance for Lauderdale County students, the dancers planned to host a social dance at the Boys & Girls Club of East Mississippi Monday afternoon and a special student performance on Wednesday. On Tuesday, the company was set to have a public performance at the Riley Center.

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