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XL Arts

Arts: Charismatic leader creates Austin Puerto Rican center

By **Shermakaye Bass**
Thursday, August 10, 2006

She arrives wherever she arrives in a flurry of flying skirts and feminine wile. Her burnished ringlets dance when she speaks, and her smile is ultra bright. Look out, world: Ana Maria Maynard in full radiance could charm the armor off an armadillo. She'd charm him and then cajole some grant money out of him.



Rodolfo Gonzalez
AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Ana Maria Maynard turned a dance company that was losing its lease into a Puerto Rican cultural center.

▶ The new cultural center is at 701 Tillery St. 251-8122. www.prfdance.org.

Mother of two and an engineer at IBM, Maynard is the indefatigable founder of the Puerto Rican Folkloric Dance company, an Austin nonprofit company that started nine years ago with three troupe dancers and six students and last weekend opened its new 2,100-square-foot cultural center, at 701 Tillery St.

As always, adults and children come to learn the Plena, the Bomba and other traditional dance forms. But if Maynard has her way, old-timers will soon settle in for an afternoon of dominoes and hipsters will come for an evening of Puerto Rican film.

Last year, the group became one of only four cultural centers in the United States sanctioned by the Puerto Rican Institute of Culture in San Juan.

More diverse programming will follow, Maynard assures her legions. On average, 70 students, dancers and musicians attend programs at the dance company weekly, and she expects that number to grow with the new space.

Only a year ago, observers wondered if the company would survive at all. When Maynard was notified that her all-volunteer organization would lose its lease on part of a Clarksville-area studio last year, even she was worried. For months, Maynard searched for an affordable alternative, but nothing was working out. Then she learned Ruta Maya Importers wanted to help.

"They're giving us a large cash donation over the next two years, to subsidize the rent for a place beyond what we could afford," she says. "It's wonderful, because if I'd had to do this on my own, who

knows where we would have been?"

Somehow, you suspect Maynard and company would have survived. Born in the Bronx, the oldest of four girls, she isn't just energetic and ambitious; she is those things made flesh. She won the gold medal in English at her high-school graduation, then attended college at Carnegie-Mellon in Pittsburgh. She is a self-taught promoter, grant writer and "ambassador" of Puerto Rican culture.

It's exhausting just thinking about a day in the life Ana Maria Maynard.

"I don't count the number of hours I put in every week because it might frighten me," she says. "Basically I don't have any other hobby. I don't volunteer anywhere else. I don't watch television. I don't even go shopping anymore — I buy my clothes online. My family's not always thrilled." But fortunately, her husband and children care about Puerto Rican culture almost as much as Maynard does.

And yet, the truth is, Austin doesn't have a very large Puerto Rican population — less than one percent. Killeen, San Antonio, Dallas and Houston host substantial communities, however, and Maynard says Puerto Ricans from those cities come to the dance company's annual performances in June and December. Locally, she estimates her audience is 60 percent to 70 percent Puerto Rican and Latino, 20 percent African American and 10 percent other ethnicities.

Still, why a cultural center here if Austin isn't a major Puerto Rican hub?

Maynard says the idea formed when she attended Concordia University's International Festival 10 years ago.

"I was watching the stage, and the Chinese had a group and the Mexicans had a group, and I was sitting there with my (then) 6-month-old son and started thinking, 'Oh my God, there is nothing for him here in Austin.' "

Within nine months, Maynard was teaching her first folkloric class. Since then, the organization has blossomed into a performance company with a dance troupe, a musical ensemble and a youth choir, as well as various classes and activities. It runs on a \$120,000 annual budget, based on private donations and grants from the City of Austin Cultural Affairs Office, and draws 400-plus people to its semi-annual "Celebrando" performances.

"When I was growing up in New York, my family very much celebrated our culture. It was an everyday thing — so much so that my mother would always say to me, 'If anyone asks you, you tell them you're Puerto Rican.' It was one of those mantras that mothers have, and I never forgot it. I can always hear the island calling," Maynard says. "But I never understood what she meant until I moved away. That's when I understood that I didn't 'live' in New York. I didn't live in the mainland United States. I lived in Puerto Rico — from the cooking to the language to the way my house was decorated. I called it a suburb of San Juan, separated by a little water."

Now that "suburb" is Austin.

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