

# THE EVERETT HERALD

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## Mari's Place gives kids a reason to stay and play

By Kari Bray

Six tutus and a dozen little pink ballet shoes.

The girls filed in to the bright studio and formed a circle, their movements reflected in long mirrors on the walls.

Their instructor, 17-year-old Bianca Hernandez, smiled at her class. "Listos. Manos abajo."

The girls put their hands at their sides and held steady until the music swelled, a slow, haunting version of "Once Upon a Dream" from Disney's "Maleficent."

The preschool and kindergarten-age dancers performed a simple ballet routine. They waved their hands in the air, spun around, walked toward each other and backed away, swayed back and forth, repeated the steps and ended with a bow. Bianca gave short instructions in Spanish and English.

Ballet is one of many classes offered for free to children between 3 and 17 years old at the nonprofit Mari's Place. Each year, the organization serves about 800 children between 3 and 17 years old. Founder Mary Toews wanted to create a place where children from low-income families and diverse cultural backgrounds can learn and share the arts. Volunteers teach dance, painting, fencing, golf, music, acting and more.

Bianca started volunteering three years ago at her mom's insistence. Now she loves it. She teaches ballet and hip-hop to children from 4 to 8 years old.

The confidence she's gained has spilled over into her life outside of Mari's Place. She speaks Spanish at home and never thought she'd have the courage to take advanced high school classes taught in English. Last year, she took some AP courses and kept all A's and B's.

Areli Chavez, 14, teaches traditional Mexican dance classes with her mom at Mari's Place. It's a fun way to share her culture, she said. Through teaching, she's learned to persevere even when she's had a tough day. She tries to pass that lesson on to her students.

"I would just say for kids to always try their best," Areli said. "Life is hard, right? So we all have to do our best and never give up."



Herald Devani Padron, left, and Daisy Ramos perform during dance class at Mari's Place in Everett on July 13. (Kevin Clark / The Herald)

Mari's Place gives kids and teens a chance to express themselves in a safe place where they won't be told that they're no good at something, said Johanna Aguirre, 12, a student who also helps with emails, letters and office work. She's taken art and golf classes at Mari's Place for nearly two years.

The experience goes beyond learning to draw or dance or play a sport, Bianca said. "You find yourself," she said.

It's not just children and teens who learn who they are during their time at Mari's Place. Adults who volunteer there discover hidden talents and a family that speaks in a jumble of different languages but loves to laugh together. Kristina Wiltse, 26, and Andrea Villa, 20, say they found a home there, and they also found people who push to bring out the best in them.

"This place, it's got this feeling," Wiltse said. "I'm never stressed out. I can let my problems go. We can all be ourselves and not worry

about it. Everybody loves everybody."

Wiltse helps Toews around the office. She makes phone calls, handles donations and writes letters and thank you cards. She keeps things organized amid the lively chaos of children dancing, painting and playing.

Wiltse was connected to Mari's Place through Service Alternatives, a program under the state Department of Social and Health Services. It's changed her life, she said.

"I'd given up on my dreams and figured I'd just settle for a job anywhere," she said. "I didn't think I had the skills I needed to get by, but Mary showed me I can ... My confidence went from zero to 10 in just a couple of months and I'm back on the road I need to be."

Villa teaches art classes. She likes showing children how to work with watercolors or acrylics. Sometimes, they start with simple sketches.

"I've learned that we have to take things bit by bit," she said. "Everyone works at their own pace and it's interesting to see how people

grow along the way."

Toews wants to bring out the talent in young people. Everyone has talent, she said. Some people have become afraid to use theirs.

"Coming here has been a great step toward building my confidence," Villa said. "Teaching my first class, I didn't know it would go so well. I feel like I have to make a difference and push the kids to come out of their comfort zone, too."

It's an uphill battle, especially in Latino families, to sell the idea of free art, music and dance classes for kids, Toews said.

"It's so hard to convince the parents how important the art is," she said. "The parents, they come here (to the U.S.) and work. But the art gives the kids culture."

To keep up with the bills for the little house at 2321 Hoyt Ave. where Mari's Place has its classes and to be able to offer the programs to more local kids, she's asking the community for help. Money is tight, she said, and any donations would be appreciated. Volunteers also are needed.

She wants to teach the next generation to give back. Needing help and helping others are not mutually exclusive. She believes people should be able to reach out with one hand to ask for assistance and with the other to offer it.

"It's easy to say I'm poor, I have an excuse," she said. "It's time to teach your kids to give back, time to pass that torch to the next generation. No excuses."

Before coming to Mari's Place, Wiltse heard the words "don't" and "can't" a lot. She didn't feel like others had faith in her, and she didn't have faith in herself. Now that's changing.

"I realized I've only discovered a little piece of me, and there's so much more," she said. "I just needed somebody to tell me I have it in me. Mary will never give up on you."

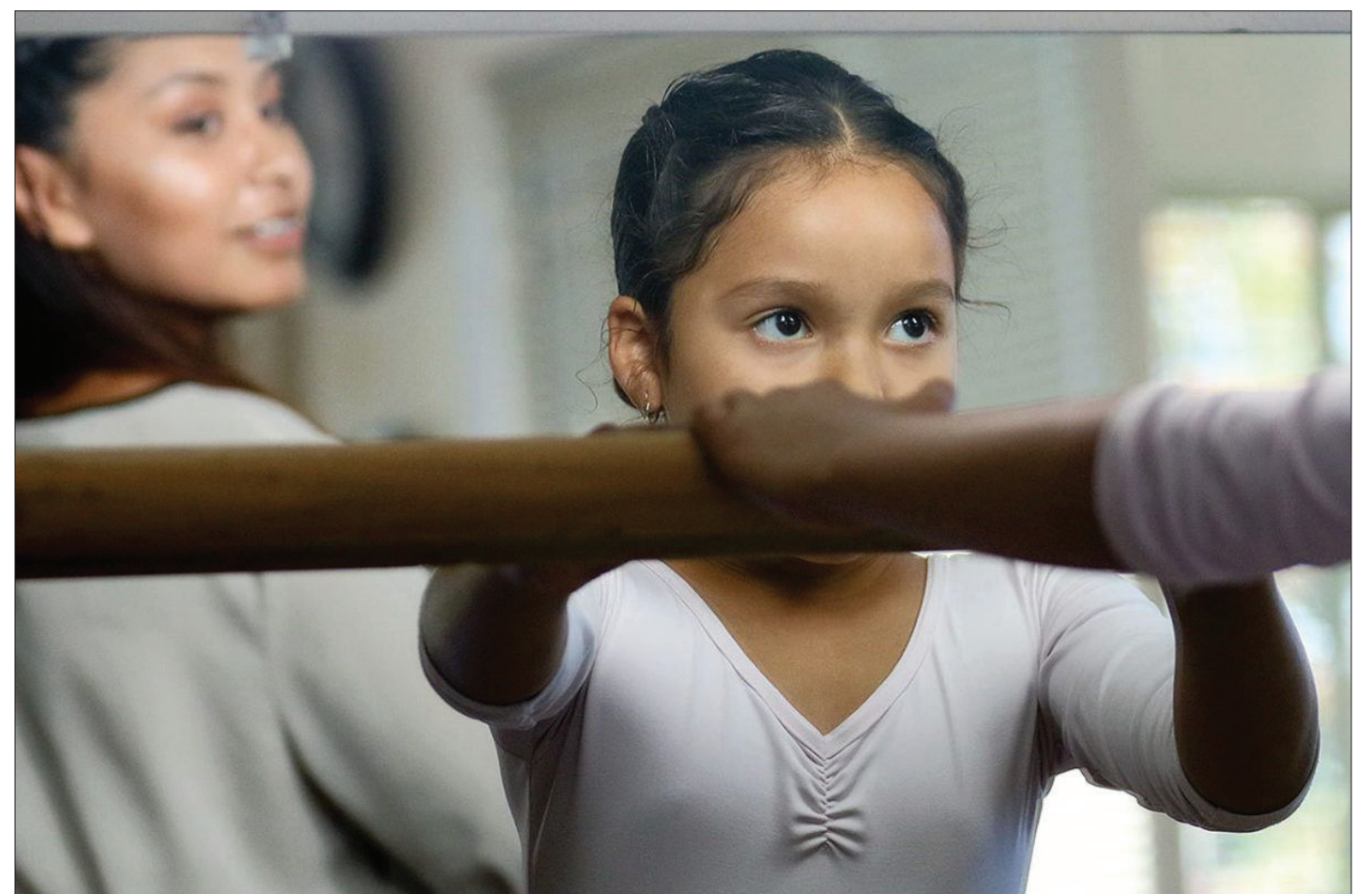
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How to help

To donate or volunteer with Mari's Place, go online to [marisplacearts.org](http://marisplacearts.org) or call 425-257-1027.



Bianca Hernandez performs during dance class at Mari's Place in Everett on July 13. (Kevin Clark / The Herald)



Daisy Ramos works out on the bar with Bianca Hernandez, instructor, looking on during dance class at Mari's Place in Everett on July 13. (Kevin Clark / The Herald)