

Teachers Take Chinese Dance Course

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Escondido--Laughter and the snap of swirling, brightly colored ribbons lit up the stage last week as some 35 teachers from Escondido, San Marcos and Valley Center tried to match the grace of Chinese dancer Lily Cai.

They were among 144 teachers from 20 schools who visited the California Center for the Arts, Escondido, for a SUAVE program on Chinese dance and culture, and how to incorporate it into their classrooms.

"Here we ask students to create," Cai told the teachers. "In China we don't ask students to create; we ask them to follow."

SUAVE--Socios Unidos (Para) Artes Via Educacion--is a partnership between schools and the arts center that started four years ago with three schools, said Leah Goodwin, the center's director of education and outreach.

The partnership provides programs to help teachers figure out how to use the arts in their classrooms for a variety of subjects. Art coaches also visit the classrooms weekly.

Cai was a principal dancer at the Shanghai Opera House in her native China before moving to San Francisco, where she spent 12 years as a high school teacher. She founded her own dance company and serves as executive director of the Chinese Cultural Center.

Thursday, Cai's dance troupe staged two morning performances for 700 students and teachers from throughout North County as part of the art center's school play program.

Later, the teachers broke into groups for instruction in dance and how to create the brightly colored ribbons and fans used in traditional Chinese dances.

"I want you to go up and down more," Cai said laughing, as she flipped her 10-foot-long, 14-inch-wide silk ribbon high in the air. Teachers tried with varying degrees of success to mimic Cai's dance with purple, red, green, aqua and orange streamers.

"Try to make a ribbon so it's not always on the floor," she said, leading the teachers-turned-students through the intricate moves that mimic fish, waterfalls, dragons and just about any other graceful thing you can imagine.

Cai begins more complex movements with the addition of the music of Chinese drums, cymbals and flutes.

"You ready to try to write the letter Z?" she said. "In dance you learn to concentrate, you learn confidence. This is a wonderful, wonderful way to make children feel proud of themselves."

"What's exciting about this is these teachers are using the arts to teach the existing curricula," Goodwin said. "You can use the arts to teach. you can learn math through music, social studies, history and vocabulary through poetry."

"I think it's excellent," said Morgan Brunner, a third-grade teacher from L.R. Green School in Escondido who was struggling to control a long, purple ribbon. "It's something we can bring back and the kids will love it. It's fun for us, too."

"It gives a great insight into the culture," said Robert Todd, as arts teacher and coach at Pioneer Elementary School in Escondido.

SUAVE is one of a number of increasingly popular programs for schools offered at the Escondido arts center, Goodwin said.

Some 26,000 reservations have already been received for 29 school shows scheduled for this season. They feature professional performers such as Cai in productions meant to appeal to school-age children, teachers and parents.

That's up from just more than 17,000 for all last season, Goodwin said, adding that "we're pretty excited about that."