

METRO & STATE

The Miami Herald



TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2007 | EDITOR: MANNY GARCIA magarcia@MiamiHerald.com | 305-376-

LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND



PHOTOS BY EMILY HARRIS / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

TANGO MOVES THEM

UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYES OF PROFESSIONALS, STUDENTS AT THE MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND ARE MASTERING THE INTRICATE STEPS OF THE TANGO

BY GLADYS AMADOR

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Natalia Sulca, who just turned 15, stands at the ready in the middle of the dance floor. Head down, shoulders tense, back arched,

Natalia is ready to tango.

For Natalia, who has been blind since birth, trying to master the intricate steps of the Argentine dance has brought a new kind of sensation into her life.

"I'm excited by the energy of the dance and all the new steps we learn each class," said the eager teen who lives in North Miami-Dade.

Natalia is one of about two dozen blind students learning to tango as part of an innovative program at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind in Little Havana.

The idea of offering tango classes at the Lighthouse is the brainchild of Dianne Basha Castro and Carol Durbin, who run a nonprofit organization called The Shimmy Club. They



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Watch a video of students taking tango lessons

brought their program. You Move Me Tango, to the Lighthouse with the help of a \$50,000 grant from The Children's Trust.

Castro sees the classes as a means to teach the blind teens more than a dance but also socialization. She hopes it will give them much needed confidence at a time in their lives when they're starting to venture out on their own.

"We wanted to help transition these teens into a life of independence and expose them to new cultural experiences," she said.

The lessons, which will run until next year, are held weekly in a spacious meeting room at the Lighthouse, 601 SW Eighth Ave.



GUIDING HAND: Diego Blanco, right, works with William Cozart, 16, who is paired with Sylvia Stinson-Perez.

•TURN TO TANGO, 2B

LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND

Blind teens, adults take on tango

• TANGO, FROM 1B

The students are led into a room where a sound system and a CD collection of romantic tango classics by such artists as Osvaldo Pugliese, Carlos Di Sarli, Miguel Caló and Enrique Rodríguez awaits them.

Five professional dancers have been hired to teach the class. The teens are paired with each other or a community volunteer who helps them learn tango techniques.

Among the teachers is Diego Blanco, 25, a Miami native now living in New York and working as a professional tango dancer. As a teen, Blanco said he struggled to fit in, to break out of his shell. His salvation was taking tango lessons at a community lodge in Coral Gables at his father's urging. Tango worked for him; he hopes it does for the sightless teens.

"The essence of tango is socializing," he said.

Blanco, a graduate of New World School of the Arts, heard about the Lighthouse tango lessons from its creators and jumped at the chance to spend a year helping students like Natalia, one of his quickest studies.

In learning the tango, Natalia will often sit at a table eagerly listening her turn to dance.

The idea is to create a setting for the students similar to what Argentines call a *milonga* — a social gathering where people come to dance tango.

As soon as she hears the



EMILY HARRIS / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

CONVERTS: Dariel Morales, 19, right, laughs with Natalia Sulca, 15, and instructor Diego Blanco. Initially uninspired, Morales said he fell in love with tango during the first class. Natalia is eager to learn more steps.

music and is told to get into "dance position," the young dancer raises her head high, relaxes her shoulders and readies to take her cues from the beats.

Furious Berrain, a junior at Miami Northwestern Senior taking the lessons, waits nearby for his turn.

"I never thought I'd be into something like tango, you know?" said Morales, who is partially blind. "But as time progressed, I loved it more and more."

Other students also did not embrace the idea of the tango lessons immediately.

Dariel Morales, 19, balked,

saying it sounded boring.

"I wanted to move around, like in salsa," said Morales, who is also partially blind.

"But after the first day I fell in love with the diversity of the steps," he said.

The teens are taught to feel out the room in order to grasp the space, to listen

carefully to the dance teacher's directions and to trust their partners, the last aspect the hardest part for anyone, Blanco said.

"It's all about imagination," Morales explains. "You close your eyes and let the rhythm move you, the way you feel it."

WANT TO HELP?

To become a volunteer for the blind, contact one of these organizations:

• **The Shimmy Club Inc.**
4045 Sheridan Ave., Suite 333, Miami Beach
305-740-5763

www.theshimmyclub.org
info@theshimmyclub.org

• **Miami Lighthouse for the Blind**
601 SW Eighth Ave.
305-856-2288
www.miamilighthouse.org
info@miamilighthouse.org

Tatiana Palma, an associate director of rehabilitation at the Lighthouse, said the classes bring confidence, independence and coordination, among other things, to the blind teens.

"They learn more than just the dance," she said. "They learn how to better socialize with each other, how to interact with different groups of people and it's great for things like balance, object perception and listening skills."

Silvina Valz, an Argentine tango dancer, is the only professional instructor at the Lighthouse with experience teaching blind kids. She said the learning goes both ways.

Watching the blind students tackle and conquer something that may seem so foreign is inspiring, she said.

"They have taught me so much about patience, tolerance and life's pleasures," Valz said of her sightless students.