



Graceful: Cynthia Massenberg (right to left) of Farmington, Victoria Lara of Redford, Shizu Aoki of Livonia and Lesley Kimber of Warren practice a form of Spanish dancing as the guitar players play.

STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HAWLEY

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Spanish dancing.

The recognition came about after del Carmen's friends and acquaintances contacted the Spanish consulate in Chicago in hopes of getting some kind of proclamation applauding her contributions. After learning of her accomplishments, the consulate asked King Carlos to consider naming her a dame.

"It's a title given to people who have given up their time and improved the cultural aspect of the country they represent," del Carmen explained. "In Michigan, 95 percent of all dancers who do Spanish dance have in some way been in contact with me. I always had a manager and I never had to say anything on my behalf," she said. "Now when I have to say something, I'm very embarrassed by it."

A hit in her step, a playful manner and a slim figure kept trim by her work seem to defy time. The lively green eyes and

FLAMENCO

vexing smile is of a middle-aged woman, not the mother of four, grandmother of nine and great-grandmother of one.

Married 56 years, del Carmen refers to her husband, Eugenio Montes, as the "man of my dreams."

"He's so willing to let me go ahead and do these things always and he's always behind me 100 percent," she said. "He's been my biggest fan. Through it all, he has been so fabulous."

A new interest

While she couldn't say exactly how many students she has taught over the years, del Carmen said it has to be in the hundreds. The popularity of the dance form, she said, goes in cycles.

"Now, there's a resurgence and it's going on up again," del Carmen said. "In New York, the studios are filled with people wanting to learn Spanish dancing. Some people like the thought of Flamenco and others are surprised to know there's something other than Flamenco. Spanish dancing is challenging, exciting and very hard work."

Del Carmen was influenced by her father, Jose Perez, who played the guitar and shared his love for dance and music with his daughter.

"I always think that I'm reincarnated, because ever since I can remember, I have felt the music in me," she said.

In fact, she was born in New York City to a couple who emigrated from Spain. When she was 17, del Carmen was offered a job performing in a Spanish night club in Detroit, which prompted her to move to Michigan.

After all these years of experience in front of audiences, the stage fright never goes away. Before she performs del Carmen has to quiet her anxiety.

"I must make the sign of the cross 60 times and I say: 'Dear Lord, get me through this.' He's probably sick of me and is saying right back 'Get out there and do it.' But you don't know what's out there."

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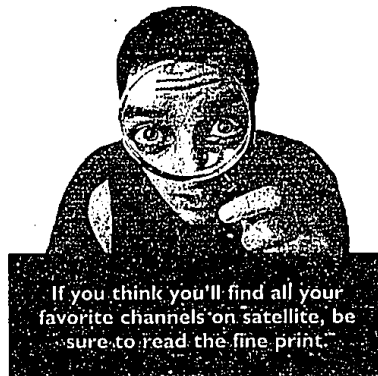
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