

Published August 18th, 2010

Building Community to the Beat of the Drum

By Lou Fancher



Eduardo Lopes and participants Photo Lou Fancher

Who could predict that hitting something, repeatedly, would increase a group's sense of community?

But that is exactly what happened at Moraga's Hacienda de las Flores on Wednesday, August 4th. There, a group made up of Saint Mary's College students and area residents gathered in a circle for a drum workshop led by World Drummer and Yamaha Fellow Eduardo Lopes.

Given, the group wasn't "hitting," they were drumming, but even so, the rapid transition of strangers into friends was impressive.

A forum held last March on the SMC campus, attended by Mayor Ken Chew and Vice Mayor Karen Mendonca, led directly to this month's four-part workshop. The SMC Women's Resource Center (WRC) had brought Lopes to the students with the express purpose of stimulating leadership and connection. Lopes' rhythm-centered approach worked so effectively, Mayor Chew suggested the greater community would benefit from an opportunity to participate.

Napoleon Dargon, a recent graduate of SMC, introduced himself at the start of the first workshop: "I'm an alumni and until recently, I didn't even know where the Starbucks (in Moraga) was. It struck me, after two years, I should know where things are." According to Sharon Sobotta, WRC Director, Dargon spoke for many SMC students, who lack a strong connection to the community.

Ellen Beans, a Moraga resident attending the workshop, has been trying to get the word out at the other end of the street, "I tell Moraga citizens what is going on at the college. The days of distance are over!"

Having admitted to the gulf between the community and the college in their introductions, Lopes began to build bridges. Requesting a definition of rhythm, the group called out their ideas: "It's motion," said one. "A pattern," said another. "It's a set of sounds that hold emotion," came the last call, satisfying the group.

Lopes then led the group through a series of exercises. From unison clapping to a challenging schematic of ascending numbers, his ad-hoc orchestra of drummers laughed, struggled and worked together to share the beat.

"It's an exercise in trying to communicate," Lopes said after the event. "From rhythm, people will have a notion of how to synchronize with others. It's an experiment in what we do every day of our lives. Our biological system has rhythm, and nature does, and time."

As the workshop progressed, variations became more obvious. "Unison is very simple, but very difficult," Lopes said to the group. "Because we are very different, which doesn't mean it isn't done properly." He comforted them with questions. "What do we do if someone plays off rhythm? It's like society: do we make a person adjust to us, or do we adjust to the person?" To find the answer, he posed another question: "What kind of group are we?"

Later, when one drummer lost track of the count, several others called out: "Five! It's five!" In just two hours, they had defined themselves as a community; eager to assist, to get it right, to help each other. Lopes noted how they looked to each other for support, and even, for correction. "Sometimes, to make a connection, we have to stop and say, 'Let's wait, this isn't right,'" he said.

Eric Anderson, president of SMC's Black Student Union, said he thinks more community-college events will be good for both entities. "If there are things like this, showing that we are welcome, that's good for retention at the school," he said. "I'm learning that community outreach, around here, isn't about helping the underserved, it's getting to know people. I want to be one of the first ones to jump in."

Subsequent workshops held on Wednesdays during the month of August continue to explore community relationships through music, art and dance. There are two workshops remaining - tonight, August 18th, and next Wednesday, August 25th, from 6:30-9:30 p.m. at the Hacienda. Drums are provided, but feel free to bring your own. All ages are welcome, 12 and under with an adult. Call 925-888-7034 to register or get more information; donations accepted.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA