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KEEPING CULTURE ALIVE

Aztec Dance group teaches cultural practices to students at Truman State

BY EMILY WICHMER, Staff Reporter

Drums beat and feathers fly as the dancers of Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc stomped their feet, causing the small shells tied around their ankles to shake and rattle.

The group performed traditional Aztec Dances to Aztec music at an event sponsored by the Hispanic American Leadership Organization to share Hispanic cultural traditions with the community, HALO president sophomore Norma Castro said.

The group, comprised of 40 members, is originally from St. Paul, Minn. and was formed in 1995. The group performed and taught traditional Aztec Dances, which they learned from guest artists trained in Aztec Dance, during an interactive workshop Feb. 16 in the Student Union Building.

Audience members watched the group perform and learned some Aztec Dance moves after the performance.

Castro said HALO tries to share their message, "Somos América," which means "We are America," by demonstrating Hispanic values through community service projects, such as through hosting cultural activities like the Aztec Dance, Castro said.

The Aztec Dance performance and workshop was special because it involved Hispanic heritage throughout North America, Castro said.

"The Aztec Dance really took us back to our roots," she said. "It's something people don't see every day and it keeps a part of the Hispanic tradition alive. People can see firsthand how Mexican Americans celebrate their heritage."

Felipe Cuauhtli, the "cabeza," or leader, of the Danza Mexica Cuauhtemoc group, said he has performed Aztec Dance with the group for 15 years.

The group tries to educate the public about Aztec culture, as well as human rights, political justice and the value of

the earth through their dancing, Cuauhtli said. He said the moves and underlying messages of the dances symbolize and express the importance of these issues.

"Aztec Dance allows us to act and react in a creative way," Cuauhtli said. "We always try to make sure that we can educate people about the rights of Mother Nature and the rights of the people."

Even the colorful costumes have significance, Cuauhtli said. He said dancers wear colorful costumes with beading and feathers. His headdress, made of an intricately beaded band and a crescent-shaped arrangement of long brown and purple feathers, signifies the rays of the sun and demonstrates his importance within the group, he said.

Typically, the length of feathers is directly proportionate to a member's importance, Cuauhtli said.

The group tours many areas throughout the Midwest, Cuauhtli said.

Before each show, the group tries to get a feel for the community's attitude toward Hispanics and cultural diversity and the group gears their performance to suit the specific attitude of the community for which they perform, he said.

They ask the event coordinators, so while in Kirksville they asked members of HALO about the general attitude, Cuauhtli said. The Kirksville area seems very welcoming to the Hispanic community, Cuauhtli said.

HALO treasurer junior Josh Hagen said the organization has found events like the Aztec Dance very successful in the community.

Through events like Aztec Dance, the community can learn and participate in Hispanic culture, whether of Hispanic descent or not, Hagen said.

"I'm not Hispanic, but the experience has been great," Hagen said. "I've learned a lot about Hispanic culture and have made some good friends."