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Miami Shores hosts 22nd annual bellydance extravaganza

BY EVAN BERKOWITZ

If asked to name a city with a time-honored tradition in the ancient art of belly dancing, you might answer Cairo or Baghdad, but not many people would name the village of Miami Shores.

But Miami Shores was home to a three-day workshop on belly dancing, which included the 22nd annual belly dancing gala at the Miami Shores Recreation Center, 9617 Park Drive.

This year's extravaganza, which featured 12 performances by individual dancers and dance troupes, was in honor of the acclaimed choreographer/instructor, Yousry Sharif, the founder and director of the Egyptian Academy of Oriental Dance in New York City.

According to Kahreen Cocchi, of the mother-and-daughter belly dancing team Kahreen & Kira, the April 11-13 workshops were Sharif's 10th in Miami Shores, his first being in 1989.

Sherry Reardon, of The Rising Phoenix Dancers, who performed at the April 12 show, said she attended Sharif's first local seminar and most of the subsequent ones. She teaches belly dancing in Delray Beach and describes the Egyptian-born instructor as being very strict and demanding of his students' attention.

"He's got a wealth of material that you really need to watch," she said.

Sharif insists on training with no air conditioning, which Diana Spring, who also performed at the show, found somewhat unpleasant, but she said she understands the dance master's reasons.

"You sweat a little bit more, and your muscles warm up a bit more, and some of the movements are easier to do," she said.

The spirit of belly dancing stays alive in Miami Shores in part because of the Cocchis. Kahreen and Kira Cocchi have lived in Miami Shores for decades. Kahreen has been holding classes at the recreation center for about 30 years.

"This is a conservative community," Kahreen Cocchi said. "When we first started out, it took a while until this took off."

Kahreen was encouraged to move her operations to the Shores Performing Arts Center on Northeast Second Avenue about 10 years ago, but declined because of her longtime success at the rec center.

Kahreen has served as president of the Miami Shores women's club three times and was on the Mayor's Community Task Force, a charitable organization, for 15 years. In 2001, the Cocchis started the not-for-profit Kismet Foundation, which promotes Middle Eastern dance through classes, performances and outreach programs to schools and other organizations.

"The purpose is to make this dance accessible to the public," said Kira Cocchi, who took up belly

dancing when she was 16. She opened the April 12 show.

When Reno Cocchi, Kira's father and Kahreen's husband, was alive, he sang and performed. During the gala, his touch was everywhere. Reno Cocchi had designed the backdrop sets used in the different acts. The one chosen for Saturday night had a large golden head of King Tut at the center, surrounded by minarets and palm trees.

The family used to work at local nightclubs, restaurants and parties in the 1980s and '90s. Also during the 1990s, Kahreen & Kira danced during opening night festivities of the city of Opa-locka's annual Arabian Nights Festival.

Kahreen said that the city's late mayor, Robert B. Ingram, was a big fan of theirs. "He really liked our dancing," she said.

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