

“No Hokey-Pokey Here”

Los Angeles Times
by Erika Schickle

Wednesday, January 29, 2003

It's late on a Saturday night in Santa Monica, and the dancers are just getting started. A huge disco ball slowly rotates, sending flashes of light across ecstatic faces among the crowd. Around the edges of the room, drummers use their hands to pound out a hypnotic rhythm. Then the DJ kicks in and spins Destiny's Child, and a surge of new dancers rush to the floor.

They are grabbing hands or alone in trance-like states: they are jumping frantically, spinning off pent-up energy from the week.

“OK,” the DJ calls out, “everybody do the ankle dance! How do your ankles like to express themselves?”

Huh?

Welcome to KidTribe, a dance party for kids ages 5 – 10, led by the pied-piper with a boom-box, dance teacher, DJ, and founder Kellee McQuinn, a pixie-ish woman of 31 with bright eyes and a feather boa.

McQuinn, who grew up with a dance instructor mother, describes dance as a place “where every road converges. You're processing and feeling and expressing and connecting all at the same time, and it's completely non-linear.”

It was while she was at a communal dance last summer that it occurred to her that there was nothing like this available for kids. “I wanted to create a safe haven so that these people can grow up with choices, with joy, with peace, and empowerment.”

So the first and third Saturday of every month, the drab walls of the Santa Monica Place Mall's community room are hung with ropes of lights, balloons, and glittery streamers and, at \$15 a head, the kids take over. In one room kids feed from a massive bowl of Goldfish crackers and stand in line to get temporary tattoos, glitter spray, and hair wraps. On the dance floor, there's the ankle dance.

The kids hop and shimmy, expressing themselves through their ankles. “Now the knee dance! Knees are beautiful things!” McQuinn giggles as the kids start dancing like drunken sailors. “Now put your arms around yourself. Kiss your arm and say, ‘Self, I love you. Self, if it weren't for you I wouldn't be here!’ The kids think this is hilarious and start kissing their arms.

KidTribe has a firm “no parents” policy. There's definitely a difference in what happens when the kids are in front of their parents versus when they are in their own context, when they can create themselves in the moment,” McQuinn says.

Leslie Carbarga, a KidTribe dad, has no problem with that. “It just seems like the perfect opportunity for my daughter to interact with other kids in a healthy environment. Naturally, it also gives me a chance to get out on the Promenade on a Saturday night. But that is secondary. I would take her anywhere KidTribe was.”

McQuinn and her staff monitor the door, chaperone kids to the bathroom, and help work out the occasional conflict. But mostly, they dance, drawing younger children out onto the dance floor.

“I know what a powerful effect music has on children. A lot of their peers are listening to heavy-duty music.” She scans all the songs for content. “Anything that has too much anger or adult themes won’t get played. But if you’re 8 years old, I am the bomb when it comes to music!”

In her literature, McQuinn has described KidTribe as a rave for kids, which has upset some of the parents, who are wary of kids socializing in an adult way. McQuinn appreciates their concern. “I say ‘rave’ because it paints the picture right away, but I’m still looking for the perfect phrase to let everyone know that it’s safe. Because the last thing I want to say is ‘Hey, drugs are cool.’ I’m saying ‘Hey, your body is cool. Dancing is cool. It’s better than sitting at home with a babysitter and watching Lilo & Stitch for the 12th time.”

In these times when kids are being kept under an even closer watch, there are relatively few outlets for what clinical psychologist Wendy Mogel, author of “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee” calls “wholesome danger”. Gone are the days when kids can build forts in the woods or cruise the neighborhoods on bikes until dark. At the same time, kids are under increasing pressure to perform at school and in extracurricular endeavors.

Mogel says she is “desperate for kids to have a place to hang out where they aren’t being taught anything, and they aren’t being spied on and evaluated and intruded on.”

Veteran KidTribe member Frances Freeman, 7, seems to agree. She like KidTribe because “we have more time to be ourselves and be crazy. Parents like us to be quiet and not so noisy. I like it because we get to have the time of our lives.” Noah Ulin, 7, says he feels very comfortable at KidTribe because “I feel like all the kids here are my friends, even if I don’t really know them. They’re all very nice.”

McQuinn hopes to open KidTribes across the nation, places where kids can meet, dance, make new friends, and then stay connected to one another through the Internet, creating a legion of what she calls “peaceful warriors.”

Mogel welcomes this vision. “They need this: the legion part, the peaceful part, the warrior part. What she’s doing is embracing the best part of the modern world. Instead of just scorning it, or feeling helpless, she’s saying, ‘Let’s take advantage of the technology and the really fun music and turn it into play.’”

The hip-hop beat gives way to the spiraling, rhythmic growl of a didgeridoo. McQuinn's friend Andrew Werderitch is this week's guest performer. This is a chance for kids to feel themselves buoyed by this hypnotic instrument. They all lie on the floor, their heads on one another's bellies, as Andrew passes the ancient instrument over their bodies. The children are still, held in the embrace of sound and lost in the moment.

"Something spiritual happens when people are all in the same rhythm," McQuinn explains. "It's total unity. Since the beginning of time it's been the drumbeat that keeps us together. We have the same rhythm going on in our hearts."