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Where Dance Club and Play Date Meet for Fun

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If you lined up all the DJs who are spinning tunes at venues across Los Angeles, Noah Ulin would stand out. First, he's shorter than most of the DJs. Second, he's younger. He's 9 1/2 years old, to be exact.

Ulin is the DJ at KidTribe, a dance party for kids 5 to 10 held on the first Saturday of every month at Santa Monica Place. While the disco ball, hip-shaking music and rampant glow necklaces are typical of a rave, KidTribe has all the innocence of a club awhirl with tykes born just before the turn of the millennium. With a bevy of activities and a theme bolstered by a performance each month, it's recess and cultural lesson disguised as clubbing.

Abandoned hula-hoops litter the floor, and dancers maneuver around other hoops swirling endlessly on round tummies. In the lobby, the arts and crafts table teems with ribbons and strings of stars for little fingers to cut and glue. At the July 3 event, a drill team from Gate Street Elementary -- more than a dozen Latino and Asian mini-Britneys and Justins -- wows the nearly 40 tribe members with a routine spiced with hip-hop, salsa, swing, merengue and rock flavors. A staff of five volunteers escorts kids to the bathroom in the mall and helps them with crafts. Midway through the evening, all activity stops for Popsicle time.

Then founder Kellee McQuinn, 32, stands on a chair and reads a poem she wrote on the theme of independence: "Chase your dreams/No matter how hard it seems/Do what you love and love what you do/Never forget there's only one of you." She then asks the kids to strike a Statue of Liberty pose with their Popsicles and pledge to be happy.

McQuinn, a longtime amateur dancer who started KidTribe after post-Sept. 11 soul-searching about her contribution to the world, says, "I use pop culture to reel them in, but it's not a nightclub. It's about preserving the kids' innocence, letting them know they have everything they need inside of them."

Alyssa Laing, 9, who's been coming for a year, says, "I like it, because you get to use all of your energy. Also, you don't have to be embarrassed. You can do whatever you want to do."

Most of participants, however, want to do what McQuinn is doing. To music screened for negativity and violent or adult content, she teaches them dance moves with names like "raise the roof" (pushing the palms up) and "Harry Potter" (shaking the wrists as if casting a spell). She organizes games like "leader of the tribe," in which one child leads the others across the floor with a move.

Some regulars get hooked on dancing here, says 16-year-old staff member Layla Brisco. "Some kids even go to dance studios like Debbie Allen, and some are even in her company now," she says.

Kids also work on their stage presence during open-mike time, when individual children improvise or even to put on a rehearsed show enhanced by props and costumes. The most enthusiastic dancers formed the KidTribe dance team, which performed on Earth Day at the Third Street Promenade.

Beth Krizek, whose daughter Alex comes to KidTribe every month and even had her birthday party here, likes how G-rated and educational the dance is. The monthly themes have exposed her daughter to different cultural traditions, like salsa music and dancers for Cinco de Mayo and a summer luau with Hawaiian dancers for June.

"One month, Kellee had Celtic dancers come in, and that's all Alex wanted to do for a whole month," Krizek says. Now? "She wants to learn salsa and is asking her grandmother to make her a salsa costume."



REVELERS: KidTribe, a dance party for children from 5 to 10, is held on the first Saturday of every month at Santa Monica Place. (Lawrence K. Ho Los Angeles Times)

KidTribe