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Inclusion is Key to the Development of Challenged Teen

By Sophie Braccini



Second from left: Sofia Martinez Photo Mark Rusk

Seeing Sofia Martinez's joy on stage, during the California Academy of Performing Arts (CAPA) summer performance in Moraga on June 14 and 17, was heart warming for her mother, her family and friends- and also for the dancing community, which has embraced the teenager with a challenge; Sofia was born 16 years ago with Down syndrome.

Sofia's mother, Anandi Martinez, decided from the beginning to involve her daughter as much as possible into the regular lifestyle of kids her age, going to local public schools, participating in extra-curricular activities, and also nurturing her with the art classes Sofia loves. She sought alternative therapies aimed at maximizing her daughter's achievements. Today the teenager is vibrant and full of dreams.

"Sofia has made a difference in our lives," says CAPA director Joan Robinson-Borchers, "people like her are a blessing, they are pure love." It's been years since Sofia has been practicing dance at CAPA. The school found a place for the young girl with special needs to express herself and blossom. "She is very well fitted for the hip-hop class and the tap teacher really knows how to teach her," says Robinson-Borchers. The director adds that the community has been

very embracing, "we teach inclusion across the board," she says, "this is teaching life skills through the arts."

When meeting Sophia for the first time, it's quickly apparent that she is full of energy, of stories, of dreams and hopes. "I like hip-hop and tap," she says, "I'd love to be in a TV show." Sofia will attend the short film camp this summer at Saint Mary's College run by Joey Travolta.

"Sofia is one of the highest performing Down syndrome people I have ever met," says Ramana Vieira, a long-time friend of the Martinez's who has worked with the National Institute of Arts and Disabilities (NIAD) in Richmond. She attributes this to the way Sofia was raised. "As soon as Sofia was born and her mother learned of her disability, she looked for ways to help her grow," remembers Vieira.

"I never wanted Sofia to be in a special setting, I wanted her to model after mainstream kids," says Martinez. Sofia attended the Model School preschool in Berkeley; she was home schooled with her brother during elementary school and started at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School (JM) when the time came for middle school. "JM tried hard to accommodate her, but they did not have the resources," remembers Martinez, who transferred her daughter to Walnut Creek Intermediate where she thrived. She is now at Miramonte High School.

Besides schooling, Martinez researched alternative care options for her daughter. "Down syndrome kids over-produce hydrogen peroxide," says Martinez, "and they absorb vitamins less easily than other children. So I researched a diet and supplements that would help." Sofia is on an almost all-vegetarian diet, supplemented with Omega-3 and Piracetam. Martinez also met with Mitchell Corwin, a Berkeley chiropractor who worked with Sofia on her neural organization. "The work done with him created more space in her mouth for her teeth and tongue; it helped opening her eyes as well." Some people with Down syndrome suffer from physical limitations; the sight of Sofia dancing precisely to the beat, or doing cartwheel after cartwheel on the grass, is impressive.

Martinez has been an advocate for her daughter for 16 years, and she continues today in light of the progresses Sophia has made. She wants to see more inclusion in the high school, where she feels her daughter is not seen as an asset to the school. "Parents come to me all the time, telling me that my daughter is so sweet-this is a loving community," says Martinez, concluding, "People with disabilities are part of our humanity; they are here to teach us compassion and acceptance."

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