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# Telling Stories One Small Hand Movement at a Time:

## Indian classical dance offers opportunity for students and teacher

Dance, in all its forms, can bring joy to a person's life and provide skills like grace, elegance, and creativity. But for Bellevue Y member, Lavanya, it's also adding a sense of belonging and way of contributing to her community.

Through teaching Bharatanatyam, a form of Indian classical dance, Lavanya is not only finding a renewed sense of purpose, she is also helping her young students develop a passion and appreciation for movement and Indian culture. "I enjoy teaching because it gives opportunity to teach kids what I know, and bring a new interest to them," shares Lavanya.



Lavanya in her Bharatanatyam costume, performing.

After leaving her job as a Software Engineer in India and moving to Bellevue six months ago, she was struggling with boredom and craving a way to engage with her new community. "Losing work was the most challenging thing of moving to the US. That combined with trying to make friends and getting to know the area was quite difficult." A friend in Atlanta mentioned that she was keeping busy with her local YMCA and suggested Lavanya try the same.

"I started with the 7-day free trial and came in every day. I enjoyed exploring all different types of dance that I wasn't familiar with, like Nia, and I appreciate that the Y gives that opportunity so I began thinking this would work out," recalls Lavanya.

A casual interaction with the front desk staff opened up a whole other world of possibilities. "I mentioned I was an Indian classical dancer and would be interested in teaching kids classes if there was any such chance." Lavanya was asked to perform at the Y's Diwali celebrations, where her dance was a highlight and helped generate member interest in a kids program. "This is what I like about the Y, you are being heard for what you want and given some time to build interest in these opportunities," she explains.

### **Storytelling through Movement**

Bharatanatyam is one of the five major styles of Indian classical dance and originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu in south India. Known as the fire dance, its movements are characteristically graceful and sculptural, often mimicking the element of fire with the body. Each dance tells a story of the Hindu gods, expressed through precise hand, foot, and facial movements interpreting a song's narrative.



Performing at the Bellevue Y Diwali event

Lavanya sees her new class as a way for local kids to learn more about Indian traditions, regardless of their heritage. "They learn about our customs and stories, bringing them closer to the culture." Concentration and persistence are also a big part of the learning curve. "Studying Bharatanatyam brings patience similar to yoga and meditation. Their whole body will be under their control from the mind to the physical." To some it may seem like a simple movement to music, but Lavanya explains that it is much more than that. "As kids learn the more they come to realize that it is a dance about life itself, and it teaches important lessons."

Her own dance lessons began in second grade and while discipline is important in learning any new skill, Lavanya appreciates that dance also should be fun. "I don't want to force kids to learn, I wish to make it a very friendly and creative manner."

### **Sharing a Passion for Creativity**

As a young girl, Lavanya didn't know much about dance but her parents encouraged her to try it and then, continue practicing. "At first I felt it was very hectic to try and study and go to dance lessons and I felt I was being forced to do so many things," she says.

But she came to recognize what a wonderful opportunity it offered to develop her confidence, meet people, and be appreciated for her talent. Now that she has transitioned from student to teacher, she helps her dancers nurture the same in themselves. "I am so passionate about dance, I just completely love it because it gives so much excitement to people and you are able to express your feelings through it."

And while she is imparting her experience and knowledge to her students, they are giving back to her as well in the form of opportunity. "Now I am able to do something for society and my new community," Lavanya says. "Teaching has provided me a way to stay motivated and engaged – it keeps me going."

*A new class session begins on March 14 and is open to kids 5-15 years of age. Members and community welcome. For more information, contact Anne McDowell at [amcdowell@seattleyymca.org](mailto:amcdowell@seattleyymca.org) or visit [www.bellevueymca.org](http://www.bellevueymca.org)*