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As HALO event grows, so does its support

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Since its founding in 2011, the HALO Foundation has presented its “HALO Dance for Autism” annually as a way to generate much of its revenue.

Each year, the performance grows in size and recognition. Its aim is to educate families and the community on autism and early intervention therapies.

Cami Marseilles, HALO president and founder, started the organization shortly after her son began to show signs of autism. She discovered how difficult and expensive it can be to provide children with the services they need and turned to a lifelong passion of hers, dance, to help raise money and awareness.

In addition to Marseilles’ dancers at Corona del Mar High School, students from other area schools also perform at the annual event, and some of them have now picked up the baton and started HALO clubs on their own campuses.

Marseilles hopes these clubs give students a chance to see how their art can be used in a positive way.

After performing in last year’s HALO benefit, **Ashley Zhang**, now a senior at Crean Lutheran High School, was inspired to start a HALO club on her campus. “I was touched by the stories I heard, and this seemed like a good chance to raise money for people in my community.”

Alyssa Jones is the dance director at Crean Lutheran. “HALO’s mission is in line with our school’s mission to help students find bigger purposes,” she said. “It’s good when kids see and serve those beyond the bubble of their immediate community.”

Zhang agreed. “Starting a HALO club is a baby step to something really big,” she said. “What better way than to use dance to express yourself and bring light and joy wherever you are?”

In addition to the one at Corona del Mar High School, there are now HALO clubs at Newport Harbor High School in Newport Beach, Crean Lutheran High School and Northwood High School in Irvine, and Ayala High School and Chino Hills High School in Chino Hills. Their primary goal is to raise awareness and funding to benefit the services the HALO foundation provides to families with autistic children.

Club membership is typically a mix of dance and non-dance students, and all schools are invited to participate in the “HALO Dance for Autism” performance, whether it be through dance or performing other services, such as ushering and selling concessions.

Janelle Kaneda, a senior at Corona del Mar High School, said, “We are able to use something we love, like dance, to give back to others.”

Junior **Nicole Goon** is co-president of HALO at Corona del Mar. “We’re able to express these tough stories and spread awareness through dance, which is the most beautiful thing about HALO,” she said.

Sienna Keillor, co-president of the HALO club at Newport Harbor High School, said: “Most people are not

aware of how many people throughout our community suffer from autism. It's our job to influence those around us to see how harsh the circumstances are and how they can help."

Marseilles said she hopes the interest in starting HALO clubs on high school campuses continues to spread throughout California and beyond. "The more people that unite, the more powerful the message."

Kara Osborn, a junior at Ayala High School in Chino Hills, is working with dance director **Christina Hofstetter** to get their HALO club up and running.

"This cause is so awesome," Osborn said, "because people with autism often can't convey (in words) what they want, and since dance is a language, we're connecting with them in that way."

A featured performer in the "HALO Dance for Autism" lineup this year is hip hop dancer **Enrique Torres**, 15, of Long Beach. Torres, who has autism, started dancing at age 10 after being inspired by Michael Jackson to learn the moonwalk. Torres' family had been denied traditional forms of counseling and turned to extracurricular activities as an alternative.

For Torres, dance was the answer. "Enrique has been able to express himself in ways he hasn't been able to express verbally," said his mother, **Laura Torres**. "I love to see what he creates with his dance, and HALO has given him the capability to be a role model."

This year's "HALO Dance for Autism" benefit performance will feature performances from local high schools, dance studios and professional dance companies in the area, including Corona del Mar High School, Newport Harbor High School, Northwood High School, Crean Lutheran High School, West Coast School of the Arts, Endeavor School of the Arts, Focus Dance Center, South Coast Freestyle, HAUS of Royals, Divine Dance Center, B'ANKA, Enrique Torres, Ayala High School, Whittier Christian High School Dance Ensemble, Sunny Hills High School, Dance Star Academy of Performing Arts, Pacific Coast Academy of Dance, Team Dance Attack, Matthew Kinslow, Chino Hills Song, Project Uncut, Muse Dance Company, OC Academy of Dance and Elle Vie Dance Company.

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