

....And the Winners Are

by Gloria Almaraz with photos by Gloria Romero*

"You're all winners." These are the inspiring words that the 36 young couples at Edgewood I.S.D.'s district-wide ballroom dancing competition heard throughout Saturday morning, May 23, 2015 when they competed. The 36 couples, primarily third graders representing six EISD elementary schools (Roy Cisneros, Gardendale, Henry B. González, Las Palmas, Loma Park, and Stafford), were competing for the coveted titles of first, second, and third place winner for the entire school district.



*1st Place Winners
Gabriel Aldana &
Gianna Ramírez*

As part of their motivational efforts, dance coordinators wanted to insure that these 72 children understood that, although only three couples would be selected from the group for the championship titles, the fact that they were in the competition made them all winners and that no one should consider themselves to be losers.

According to Executive Director Jorge Alonso Pérez, the Dance Therapy—Dance Your Depression Away Program has been in existence for 15 years, but has functioned as the Dancing with the Children Program in EISD for the past seven years.

At the beginning of the current school year, 182 students began taking weekly one-hour ballroom dance lessons on tango and merengue. The end result, after in-school competitions in early May were held to select six couples per elementary school, was the final group of 36 couples.

As adults, we can only imagine the weekly sessions that included the initial problems of getting familiar with a dance partner, touching hands with the opposite sex at the awkward age of nine or ten, learning the dance format that includes the boy putting his hand on his partner's back, and learning to dance the intricate steps of the tango and merengue.

More than three hundred family members, friends, school administrators, district board members, community leaders, and the media attended the early morning event at the Neighborhood Place. For those of us who are not early morning risers, especially on Saturday mornings, the event was riveting and worth the loss of sleep.

A special demonstration of two variations of the tango was performed by Adriana Araujo Bruton and Robert Ramírez, the two instructors who have volunteered their time to give these students tango and merengue lessons throughout the current school year. Both instructors are professional ballroom dancers.

Two dance elimination rounds were held to reduce the number of competing couples. After the first round, three couples per school

were selected. In the second round, the remaining couples were named first, second, and third-place winners of each competing school. For the final round, only the first-place winners per school competed for the three district-wide championship titles.

It was exciting to watch these young dancers exhibiting their dance abilities to the music of tango and merengue. As young and inexperienced as they are at ages nine or ten, the dancing styles of these young couples were amazing. One could see and sense their competitiveness as they danced for the championship—something they had worked and trained hard for since September 2014.

Amidst cheering from family and friends and encouragement from the dance instructors and judges, the difficult decision was made on who would be the top three couples in the district.

The judges included DA Nicholas LaHood and his wife, Davida; EISD board member, Mary Lou Mendoza; Baldemar Pérez of Dance Therapy; A.J. Abrahms; Mayra Gamino; and Elizabeth Aleman. They had the difficult task of judging the couples as they danced the tango and merengue at the first two elimination rounds.

U. S. Congressman Joaquin Castro, a major supporter of the dancing program, was in attendance and delivered a stirring tribute to the nation's veterans in recognition of the Memorial Day observance.

Famed Las Vegas performer and entertainer, Lola Falana, made a special appearance and judged the final round of the dance competition. With the 36 couples gathered near her, Ms. Falana spoke to the children about her beliefs and stressed that they can accomplish any goal they may set for themselves.

Now living in San Antonio, she spoke about her life as an example of someone who came from a humble background but who was able to achieve fame, stardom, and financial success. In a special ceremony, Ms. Falana was recognized for her continued support of EISD's ballroom dancing program.

As for selecting the 2014-2015 top ballroom dancing couples



Henry B. González



Championship winners (L to R): Executive Director Jorge Alonso Pérez; 2nd Place – Valerie Santos and Adam Islacve from Roy Cisneros Elem.; 1st Place – Gabriel Aldana and Gianna Ramirez from Las Palmas Elem; 3rd Place - Juan De La Cruz and Stephanie Contreras from Stafford Elem; and dance instructor, Robert Ramirez.

for the EISD, Ms. Falana stated that it was “hard to pick a winner.” But, in the long run, the judges selected the following:

First Place:

Gabriel Aldana and Gianna Juliana Ramirez, *Las Palmas Elementary*

Second Place:

Adam Islacve and Valerie Santos
Roy Cisneros Elementary

Third Place:

Juan De La Cruz and Stephanie Contreras
Stafford Elementary



Gardendale



Henry B. González



Las Palmas



Las Palmas

All winners received a trophy and a gift certificate. First-place winners were also given stuffed animals. In addition, the school of the first-place winners will be allowed to display the large district championship trophy for the upcoming school year.

For the second consecutive year, Las Palmas Elementary School produced the first-place winners. At this year’s ceremony, the school was given a permanent trophy for winning last year’s competition.

As word has spread of the ballroom dancing program at EISD, there has been an increasing awareness and support by local ballroom dancing aficionados. Among them has been community leader Edith McAllister, widow of Walter McAllister, Jr. A lover of ballroom dancing, Ms. McAllister is known to have been an excellent dancer in ballroom dancing circles. She has been a generous supporter of EISD’s ballroom dancing program for several years, and this year donated the gift certificates that were given to the students.

Executive Director Jorge Alonso Pérez and Adriana Araujo Bruton and Robert Ramirez, the two dance instructors, are to be commended for sharing their passion for dance, in this case ballroom dancing, with future ballroom dancers.

Is there a future Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers in the making? ★

* See the June 2015 issue of *La Voz* for the first article on *Dancing with the Children*.