



Teens Connecting Through Salsa

SalsAmigos is a non-profit corporation registered in the state of Colorado founded by Sam Gill and Jenny Gill, co-owners of Bantaba World Dance and Music in Boulder, Colorado. It offers programs for teen-agers in Latin American social dance—principally a salsa dance form known as *rueda de casino*. The programs include after school classes, monthly salsa dance nights, and a performance troupe. Future plans include salsa music instruction, and the creation of an online “space” where teens can connect with peers interested in *rueda de casino* and salsa. Based on the distinctive methods of SalsAmigos instruction and organization many identifiable teen needs are met.



SalsAmigos program

- **Dance classes:** SalsAmigos provides instruction in salsa dancing for teens, primarily in *rueda de casino*. Classes include simultaneous instruction at three skill/experience levels. Locations for class sessions rotate among local schools, depending on space availability and affordability.
- **After school classes:** Weekly ninety-minute classes held after school in eight-week sessions (two in fall, two in spring).



- **Summer program:** Daily two-hour classes held in two-week sessions (three sessions during the summer)
- **Dance nights:** *Rueda de casino* is a social dance and is most fully experienced in a social setting. SalsAmigos hosts regular dance nights (at least one per month) where students taking the classes and other community teens can dance and socialize together with adult supervision and participation. These events are free for teens registered in the SalsAmigos program; they are open to other Boulder teens for a nominal fee. Basic *rueda* instruction is provided so that teens who are new to the dance form can participate in the night's dancing. SalsAmigos parents and other community adults are recruited as volunteer hosts.
- **Performances and performance troupe:** SalsAmigos perform regularly. Recent performances include Boulder Creek Festival, Longmont Cinco de Mayo Festival, Longmont Salsa Night, Boulder Senior Citizens Center, Boulder Wednesday Salsa Night. Beyond this, a group of experienced dancers, drawn from SalsAmigos classes, are trained to do highly skilled performance-level salsa dancing, both improvised and choreographed, at venues and for organizations throughout the City of Boulder and the region.
- **Teacher training:** SalsAmigos provides teacher training for adults and teen assistant teachers in salsa dance forms to assure sufficient resources to support the expanding program. The training program for SalsAmigos instructors includes dozens of hours of training in salsa and *rueda* dance, Latin music awareness, and dance teaching, especially as directed to teens. This aspect of the program is essential to assure quality and consistent teaching in the program.
- **Standardized curriculum:** SalsAmigos has created a specific and standardized syllabi for its dance classes, including details on technique, style, form, etiquette and progression of learning. The syllabi progress from entry beginner to advanced levels. It has been developed through Sam Gill's work with over 100 teens learning *rueda* and continues to evolve with experience and teen feedback.

The Principals

- **Sam Gill**, PhD, has researched and taught world dance history for more than a decade at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 1999, he co-founded Bantaba World Dance and Music in Boulder, where thousands have been offered dance, music instruction and performances from dozens of cultures throughout the world. For the last five years, Sam has taught salsa in several forms to dancers of all ages and levels. In 2003, Sam organized and began coaching a group of teen-age girls—The Salseritas—who performed widely and competed internationally. In 2005, The Salseritas took fourth place at the annual “Cuba Baila!” international Rueda competition in Vancouver (see www.dancerueda.com for videos of Boulder Salseritas). Salseritas has now become an all-ages women’s salsa performance group. Sam has also taught Rueda de Casino sessions several times at New Vista High School in Boulder.
- **Jenny Gill**, BA in Ethnomusicology, University of Washington, has been the co-owner and general manager of Bantaba since 1999. She is trained to teach SalsAmigos classes.

Needs met by SalsAmigos

- **Helps decrease feelings of isolation and detachment:** SalsAmigos dancing involves all the participants in the dance circle at all times—each dancer is an equally important part of the whole. The dancers maintain connection with each other and the group throughout the dance, often through safe physical contact. The circle form and the way moves are done in unison encourages a feeling of group camaraderie, even among dancers who do not know each other well.
- **Helps decrease stress and lift feelings of sadness/hopelessness:** One of the strengths of the SalsAmigos program is its ability to assist at-risk youth without calling attention to them by providing a mood-enhancing experience to any participant. SalsAmigos dance circles typically have a positive, high-energy feeling to them; the dancers often break into spontaneous applause at the end of a class as an expression of enjoyment. SalsAmigos dancers also learn and perform complicated moves, which can seem daunting to the novice. The confidence that teens develop through learning to handle challenging moves can translate into confidence about handling life challenges, and by extension, decrease feelings of hopelessness and overwhelm that lead to risk behaviors. Teens who have participated in Sam’s rueda classes and Salseritas group have demonstrated increased self-esteem through more confident and interactive social behavior, as well as changes in body posture and carriage.
- **Provides substance-free nighttime activities:** SalsAmigos monthly dance nights give SalsAmigos teens and their friends an affordable, fun nighttime activity in a substance-free environment.
- **Creates a diverse community of tolerant, respectful teens:** SalsAmigos is open to all teens—no dance experience is required, there are no try-outs or “cuts,” and scholarships are available. All participants are equally valued and involved—there is no “back row,” as in other dance forms, and the SalsAmigos approach makes

dancing accessible for people who would otherwise find dance classes inhospitable or too difficult. The SalsAmigos community includes a diversity of teens representing different social classes, ethnic groups and sexual orientations. The nature of the program brings together teens who typically wouldn't know one another in positive, relationship-building activities. All of this encourages tolerance and respect and breeds an attitude in participants that discourages harassment.

- Dancing *rueda de casino* as taught by SalsAmigos creates an environment in which all dancers assist one another as a necessary part of the dance. The called moves are often complicated and all dancers frequently need the help of their partners to successfully execute a move so that the circle continues. In this environment, teens readily engage this spirit of cooperation and respectfully assist others, no matter what their identity, in service to the group efforts. It is done in passing and usually without even being noticed beyond the two dancers involved. “Mistakes” in dancing are commonly embraced with laughter and good will rather than with criticism or derision.
- It has been the experience of the SalsAmigos staff that *rueda de casino* is an ideal way to give Spanish-speaking teens and non-Spanish speakers a much-needed way to connect and socialize. Salsa music lyrics are in Spanish and the *rueda* dance moves are called almost exclusively in Spanish, while SalsAmigos instruction is currently provided in English. Both Spanish speakers and non-Spanish speakers participate and enjoy dancing together.
- For gay, lesbian, bisexual and undecided teens, the SalsAmigos experience of dancing *rueda de casino* can be especially supportive. Since all dancers learn to “lead” and “follow,” there are no gender identifications to this dancing and no emphasis on male-female pairs. Boys dance with boys and girls with girls, as well as boys and girls dancing with each other and this is accepted by all the participants. Teens have the opportunity to explore different roles without being forced to permanently accept roles that feel alien to them or to “out” themselves before they are ready.
- **Provides meaningful activities and positive peer influence for middle-school students:** SalsAmigos is open to middle school-aged youth. Since *rueda de casino* is done in a circle with frequently changing partners, teens of all ages feel comfortable and connected through the dance. It is helpful for middle-school students to have contact with older teens in this healthy, active social environment.
- **Provides a fun form of physical fitness that doesn't seem like exercise:** SalsAmigos dance classes involve 90 minutes of almost constant and rather brisk physical activity. Because of the circle, no dancers have the opportunity to move to the back and decrease their level of exertion or to “take a break” while others continue dancing. Because they are having fun, students do not even realize that they are physically exerting themselves. Most leave a dance class physically fatigued but without identifying what they have been doing as exercise.

Here is what SalsAmigos Say

Cailin Marsden - New Vista High

"SalsAmigos offers a unique opportunity to experience a diverse group of students and create relationships through dance."

"dancers constantly switch partners as well as roles of lead and follow, promoting the importance of teamwork. Through dancing, I can appreciate my body and ensure that I remain healthy through physical activity and interaction with others."

Rachel Smith - New Vista High

"The thing I like about SalsAmigos is learning one or two new moves every time we dance together. It is really fast paced and fun."

Susan Wong - Fairview High

"I like SalsAmigos because there are other young people to dance with. I am used to dancing with old men and this is a much safer environment."

Raquel Rodreguez - Mexico

"SalsAmigos is a great place for me to meet new people and make friends here in America."

Michael King - New Vista High

"My favorite thing about SalsAmigos in "Helecoptero" a Rueda de Casino dance move!"

Carlos Martin - Venezuela (SalsAmigos Teacher in Training)

“In my country we grew up dancing salsa. It is really exciting for me to see these kids from another culture, here in America dancing the same dance I did as a kid.”

Nola Hayes - Horizon Alternative K - 12

“I like dancing together in the circle and the fast pace that we learn the salsa moves.”

Mad Hot Rueda SalsAmigos compared with Dancing Classrooms

SalsAmigos’s potential for success rivals that of “Dancing Classrooms,” a ballroom dance program for the upper elementary grades that was launched in 1994 in New York City. It is now integrated into the public school curricula and it involves 18,000 youth in more than 180 New York City schools each year. It has recently expanded to other cities, including Omaha, Toronto, Chicago, Dallas, Ft Worth, and Newark (See <http://www.americanballroomtheater.com/>). The recent popular films “Mad Hot Ballroom” (<http://www.paramountvantage.com/madhot/>) and “Take the Lead” (<http://www.taketheleadmovie.com/>) are both inspired by this program.

In the words of founder Pierre Dulaine, international ballroom dance champion, “The program is not just about teaching dance, it’s about teaching pride, confidence and respect. We take the dance that is inherent in students’ bodies and help them to bring it out, not force it in, enabling students to increase their self-esteem as they learn.”

Arguably, *rueda de casino*, especially as taught by SalsAmigos, has even greater potential for success. The *rueda* dance form and the SalsAmigos approach to it offer particular benefits detailed above. Further, *rueda de casino* differs from ballroom dancing because it is not limited to two dancers; rather, it is done in a circle and can involve from four to dozens of dancers (space being the only limitation). In ballroom dancing, partners are selected on the basis of gender, appearance, body types, and so on, but a *rueda* circle is open to all dancers. Where competition ballroom dancing is limited to studio and competition settings, *rueda de casino* is a social dance form done all over the world. It is a form of salsa, perhaps the world’s most popular social dance. Having learned the dance in this program, young people can dance as adults for decades in social settings. Currently in the Boulder area, teens can go salsa dancing at least one night a week and adults can do so several nights of the week.

SalsAmigos Funding

SalsAmigos is a nonprofit corporation registered with the State of Colorado. Federal 501(c)3 application is in progress.

Financial support:

- Boulder's YOP Group Activity Fund Grant – Spring 2007
- City of Boulder Grant – Summer 2007
- Boulder's YOP Annual Grant – September 2007 through August 2009
- Donations from local businesses and individuals
- Tuition for programs – \$30 for 8-week class session including 2 parties

How you can get involved in SalsAmigos

- Donations
 - Space
 - Costumes
 - Equipment
 - Time
 - Money for scholarships
 - Web design and development
 - Provide funding for 501(c)3 application
 - Invite SalsAmigos to do a performance or demonstration
- Start a SalsAmigos program
 - At your school
 - In your neighborhood
- Train to be a teacher
- Encourage young people to get involved