



Ruby Beh from Florida performs during Yaa Halla, Y'All at A Gathering of the Stars in Texas presented by Isis in Grapevine. Special to the Star-Telegram/Bob Booth

Belly dancers showcase Middle Eastern art

The four-day event was called "Yaa Halla Y'All: A Gathering of the Stars in Texas."

By Marty Sabota
msabota@star-telegram.com

GRAPEVINE — More decades ago than she will admit, Nancy Bartlett went to a community college and signed up for the only exercise class available — belly dancing.

Now performing under the stage name Isis, the entrepreneur's whim turned into a career in Middle Eastern dance that has led to thousands of performances and her successful Isis Star Dancer Studio and Belly Dance Treasures costume boutique in Bedford.

Owner of the Colleyville-based Isis Foundation, her passion was showcased last month at her annual "Yaa Halla Y'All: A Gathering of the Stars in Texas" at the Grapevine Convention Center.

The event drew "some of the biggest names in Middle Eastern dance and music" and nearly 1,000 fans, Isis said.

It's been an interesting journey for the grandmother of 18 — hers is a blended family — who was



Jameelah Mansour of the Frisco Troupe Bodacious Bellies performs during Yaa Halla, Y'All.

born in Tennessee and raised in Georgia. Although shy as a youngster, Isis said she came alive when singing and dancing.

"When I'm on stage, all the shyness goes away," Isis said from her Colleyville home. "I don't want people to be bored."

Still, she took a practical route when attending Texas Christian University and pursued a degree in business.

Her only link to show business was performing occasionally as a singer. More on DANCERS, 4A



Silvia Salamanca from both Spain and Texas performs at A Gathering of the Stars in Texas at Grapevine Convention Center.

4A Dancers

Continued from 1A

and dancer at Casa Manana in Fort Worth.

Upon graduation, Isis found employment as a savings and loan manager, which was a nice, stable environment as she started her family. A move from California to Texas; however, led to something that would take her down a very different career path.

"I was looking for an exercise class for figure control at Tarrant County Community College (now Tarrant County College) and the only thing available was belly dancing," Isis said. "I said, 'That was it. What can it hurt?'"

The connection was instantaneous.

"I was in love," Isis said. "I had such a great time."

Her philosophy is simple.

"You can do it for fun, for exercise or for the passion of the dance itself," the performing artist said.

Her love of Middle Eastern dance quickly became a busy hobby. Soon, she was in demand at various places across the area.

In 1981, Isis appeared at the first Scarborough Faire, an annual renaissance festival in Waxahachie. The show led to many encore performances over the years.

She gained visibility performing regularly at Kostas Greek restaurant in Dallas.

Five years into learning how to dance and perform, Isis quit the savings and loan business. She laughs when she recalled how she was doing a show at a Fort Worth convention and a man stood up in the audience and said, "That's my banker!"

Isis kept busy teaching and performing at various venues — a 50-hour dance week was the norm — eventually opening up her Middle Eastern dance studio in Bedford. She said the response was overwhelming to the business that also offers drumming and hula.

You make friends for life.

Isis on what belly dancing has done for her

"We have bankers, engineers, doctors, psychologists, homemakers, lots of school teachers and people from just about every walk of life," Isis said, adding that they cater to all shapes and sizes.

Their reasons for coming are varied — physical, emotional and social to name a few.

"You make friends for life," Isis said of the studio that boasts about 300 students. "It's the most wonderful thing you will ever do for yourself."

She also created the The Isis Foundation, a nonprofit, with board members consisting of studio owners, dance instructors, students and musicians, designed to educate and present and enhance the art of Middle Eastern dance.

"The Isis Foundation will continue to create en-



Diyhanis from California performs during Yaa Halla, Y'All at A Gathering of the Stars in Texas. Special to the Star-Telegram/Bob Booth

vironments and situations whose purpose is to broaden and enlighten the general public's awareness of the related cultural aspects of Oriental dance," Isis said.

They often appear for free at places where they can spread that message, ranging from schools to nursing homes.

The focus includes "enhancing artistic, educational and cultural opportunities for teachers, dancers and musicians to study, educate and perform this ancient art in the highest

possible professional manner," she said.

Her stage name was given to her by an Egyptian man decades ago who told her, "This is who you really are," referring to the ancient Egyptian goddess. She goes simply by Isis with everyone she knows, including her husband Del, her children and grandchildren and friends and students, except the youngest ones who call her Miss Isis.

"I don't answer to anything else," Isis said. "We are who we are."

Isis is aware of the stigma associated with her name that makes some think of the terror group with the same identification. She has not been harassed for her moniker that also is the name of her foundation. It was addressed once when a man came to her studio and asked if she would change the business name. She politely declined.

Isis Star Dance Studio, the home of Isis and the Star Dancers, will bear her name for a long time, she said.

"I don't have time to retire," she said. "I don't know what I want to be when I grow up. But it's all good."

Marty Sabota, 817-390-7367