

Lake Oswego / West Linn NEIGHBORS

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Oregon State Fair is bigger than ever.

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The spirit moves in

BELLY DANCING

Story by Staff Reporter Jim Hart

Turkish zills (finger cymbals) on both of Sedona's hands keep the Middle Eastern rhythms alive while she moves her hips effortlessly, independently from the rest of her body.

The atmosphere is unmistakably foreign, and the mind and soul are filled with sounds from the guitar-like oud, hour-glass doumbek drum and flute-like ney — sounds that also filled the pharaohs' dens ages ago.

With knees bent and bare feet firmly placed, Sedona leans backward and smiles at the ceiling. The colorful fringe and sequins shake as she moves on the floor.

Never more spiritual than when belly dancing, Sedona surrenders herself to an expression of her passion for life through exotic movement.

Sans finger cymbals, her arms move through the air in response to the mysterious music — weaving like entranced cobra snakes. Arms raised high with palms together, she moves her head from side to side, seemingly apart from her shoulders.

True to the Middle Eastern traditions of this graceful dance, Sedona wraps her lower face and hair with the red silk veil that shrouds her shoulders.

Her unblinking eyes stare endlessly at onlookers in the Greek Cusina in downtown Portland while she glides from table to table, "capturing" diners with her veil.

Yet never missing a beat of the haunting Middle Eastern themes.

Holding the large veil in each hand with arms extended to the sides, she glides effortlessly across the floor with red wings flowing gracefully.

She whirls continuously — hair flowing elegantly in her self-made wind currents, always in step with the rhythms of people who have honored this fertility ritual for 50 centuries.

Dancing's in her blood

Belly dancing must be embedded in Sedona's DNA. Her family is of Spanish origin, and belly dancing rooted itself centuries ago in Cadiz, Spain and Egypt.

Sedona (her stage name) has been dancing practically since birth. As a young girl, she studied ballet and jazz dance. She also has theater experience, mainly as she exited her teen years.

After high school, she performed in community theater and then attended the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, where she also studied many forms of dance.



SUBMITTED PHOTOS / CARL GEER

Top: Demonstrating a typical veil toss, Sedona wows her audiences regularly with spectacular costuming, exotic music and graceful movements to match the Middle Eastern rhythms. Above: In a different outfit, she again tosses her veil

"Dancing has pretty much been a part of my life as long as I can remember," she said. "But discovering Middle Eastern belly dance was when I felt like that was my true medium — exactly what I was meant to do, and what I have been searching for my entire life."

It was her time on stage that has helped her produce a belly dance show that captivates audiences.

Her stage presence also has amazed nearly a dozen judges in wide-ranging competitions that she and her troupe of belly dancers have entered.

Those judges have been so inspired that they honored Sedona with the national title of 2008 Miss Belly Dance USA. The Lake Oswego resident also produces a troupe of dancers who have won top awards in international competition.

Life's turning point

While attending a music festival with a group of young friends, someone gave Sedona a coin belt of the type worn by belly dancers.

But at that time, she had never seen anyone belly dance, so she didn't know the significance of the belt that is worn around the hips and across the abdomen — the body's core, which is the center attraction of belly dancing.

She started to dance while wearing the belt, and everything changed for the teen-ager.

"I started to dance differently," she said, "and everyone at that festival started calling me the belly dancer. I felt like there was a belly dancer locked inside me, and I just needed that (belt) on my hips to bring it out. I danced for four days (at the festival) with that belt on, and all my dancing was completely transformed."

That's when she moved to the Pacific Northwest and began to study belly dancing — a place that she called a "huge mecca of belly dancing." The past four Miss Belly Dance USA winners, for example, have come



Using a typical prop, Sedona shows off her Isis Wings, a symbol of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who is a symbol of good luck and protection.

from either Portland or Seattle.

In fact, contrary to popular opinion, she says the global art of belly dancing has more performers in the United States than all of the world's other countries combined.

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Belly Dancing: She wins national title earlier this year

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She studied under Ruby Sowder in Vancouver, Wash. In her 70s, Sowder also taught Aziza, who Sedona says set the standards for belly dancing in the Portland area. Recently, Aziza asked Sedona to dance at her wedding in Bend.

Sowder helped Sedona form a career, which includes local venue performances, national and international competitions and teaching.

But her career is much more than just earning a living. It involves sharing with her audiences the music and culture as well as the movement and the costumes.

And the roots of belly dancing.

Let the spirit move you

Belly dancing, Sedona says, is a spiritual practice, sacred and very old — probably 50 centuries old.

In the spiritual realm, Sedona says she has to surrender her own ego while she is dancing. She considers this dance the spiritual practice that helps her grow and learn. She calls it a “safe place.”

“While I am dancing alone for myself or practicing for a performance or performing on stage, I am constantly pushed to grow or to let go of fear or nervousness or to be patient with myself if I can’t get something right.”

Beyond her way of growing emotionally, belly dancing is Sedona’s creative art expression.

“There’s beauty in (dancing),” she said, “and I just love what I’m doing. I feel as though something bigger is flowing through me, and I am just presenting it to people.”

“I just want to surrender myself as an artist and let God or The Great Creator flow through me so that my audiences experience beauty and grace for a moment.”



SUBMITTED PHOTO / CARL GEER

While exotic music is playing during a bachelorette party at the Greek Cuisina in downtown Portland, Sedona guides the women through several belly dance moves. The women already had received class instruction, and this was a demonstration of what they had learned.

The haunting refrains of Middle Eastern music also have a very strong attraction for Sedona. The music, she says, makes the dancing experience “very emotional and very deep,” with her emphasis on “very.”

To better understand and gain the spiritual connection necessary to really excel at this artform, Sedona has studied in Egypt and Turkey.

She had dreamed of going to Egypt (where belly dancing got its roots) since she was 8 years old, and when she finally went to Cairo the experience was overwhelming.

“I am a white, American girl,” she said, “blonde with green eyes, and I am doing the artform of another culture. I feel like I have to honor it, understand it and represent it correctly.”

Ancient fertility rite

The women of ancient Egypt and Spanish gypsies, who originated belly dancing, did not offer it as a form of entertainment, Sedona said. Instead, it was used as a ritual to prepare for childbirth or as a ritual to

wants to honor the history of the artform.

Technically, the dance is performed in four parts: the first segment has a fast tempo, and represents a girl’s youth; the second symbolizes the coming of womanhood; the third part is a floor dance that represents giving birth; and the final segment, usually a drum solo, is a fast-paced celebration of life.

But somewhere in history, the ritual became entertainment for observers, even though the performers were still clinging to its spiritual and emotional values.

“But today (those four elements) aren’t even present in a belly dance cabaret night-club show,” she said. “We’re so far from what it was, and it’s important to me to hold onto that history.”

And because this artform is a celebration of a woman’s life, Sedona says it is not like its common misconception of eroticism.

She says the dance is not meant to be sexual, seductive or erotic — just exotic. There are some movements that might be sensual, she said, but their meaning is not in that realm. To perform it correctly, it is an artform that takes lots of education and training.

And creativity.

“This is a difficult art that you have to learn,” she said, “and you have to give all of your time and energy to. This is a legitimate art, not just some hobby. You are not a belly dancer if you have taken a couple of classes and bought a costume.”

And that message from 2008 Miss Belly Dance USA demands respect for one of the oldest forms of artistic expression the world has known.

For more information, visit her Web site at www.sedonaraks.com.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

At the end of the annual national competition, this year held in Reedsport, Sedona stands beside the trophy that proves she is the best in the nation.

ensure fertility.

This dance, therefore, is only for women, and Sedona only teaches women. She says she

Local News Briefs

Oswego Place offers a reprieve

It is an opportunity for a break, a respite, a reprieve. For many primary caregivers, a five-night worry-free getaway could be a very welcome vacation.

The Oswego Place Assisted Living Community is having an essay contest where the grand prize is an all-expense paid stay at its beautiful facility in Lake Oswego. The stay includes five days and nights of personalized services, meals and all the comforts of home.

The essay entries are required to be 200 words or less explaining why your loved one should take advantage of this opportunity.

Entries are due by Aug. 25, and may be mailed or sent by e-mail to Anne Bardana, Oswego Place Assisted Living, 17450 Pilkington Rd., Lake Oswego, OR 97035, officemanagerosp@mtwestret.com.

Allan celebrates 10th anniversary

Oregon Natural Health Clinic is celebrating Dr. Judith Allan’s 10th anniversary in practice with an open house Friday, Aug. 22, from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

The public is invited to stop by the office located at 601 First St. Suite F to learn more about chiropractic care, enjoy refreshments and have a free chair massage. For existing clients, Allan is extending free adjustments during that time.

Contributions of clothing for Dress For Success are welcomed at the open house.

“I got my start in this business by some amazing women mentors that have given me so much, it’s a way to pay it forward,” Allan said.

Allan considers her practice an opportunity to serve the public and give people a chance to live a naturally healthy lifestyle by teaching them to move, eat and think in ways that promote optimal wellness.

For more information about the clinic visit the Web site at www.OregonNaturalHealthClinic.com.

Car seat safety check offered

Willamette Falls Hospital Birthplace is hosting a free car seat safety check for infant, toddler and older child car seats on Saturday from 9 a.m. to noon.

Seats will be inspected by a senior checker from the Lake Oswego Police Department, along with a trained inspector from the hospital. Parents may bring their car seats to the Community Health Education Center, 519 15th St., in Oregon City.

For more information, contact Dana Shibley at 503-789-3145.

Volunteer advocates are sought

Volunteer advocates and investigators are needed to serve as ombudsmen for residents of nursing homes, residential care facilities, assisted living facilities and adult foster care homes. The Office of the Long Term Care Ombudsman will train the volunteers on the aging process, communication skills, problem solving skills, investigation and other ombudsman skills. The certification training will begin on Sept. 12 in Portland.

For more information, phone 1-800-522-2602.