

Dance, drums and Durham:

African Rhythms class at Hayti Heritage Center

By Anthony DeHart and Matthew Audilet

For more than 15 years, a group of dancers and drummers – some experienced, some not – have come together once a month at the Hayti Heritage Center on Old Fayetteville Street for its African Rhythms dance class.

The class offers community members the chance to practice movements from the African diaspora and listen to the rhythm of drums, all in a positive environment where dancers support one another.

“It’s about love. It’s about the sharing,” said Venita Allen, a founding member of the African American Dance Ensemble. “It’s about communicating with each other, helping each other, lifting each other up. We lift each other up in this community of dance.”

The class has been going strong since 2005, but Durham’s roots in African dancing run even deeper. Since Dr. Charles “Chuck” Davis founded the African American Dance Ensemble in Durham in 1983, the Hayti community has been receptive of the various styles that celebrate its motherland.

Ivy Burch, instructor of the class and founding member of the ensemble, has seen Davis’ legacy grow over time.

“He taught African dance and is really the guru for African dance around the world,” Burch said.

African Rhythms Class

Monday, 6:30-8 p.m.
Hayti Heritage Center
804 Old Fayetteville St.
Chuck Davis Dance Emporium

Davis died in spring 2017, but the community he started continues to thrive. His portrait hangs prominently at the studio entrance, reminding the class of its cultural roots and the message Davis preached.

“It’s sharing love that continues and continues and continues,” Allen said.

“[Davis] continued to spread it out across not only Black History Month, but for all people. Although this is African dance, it



Live drummers keep dancers in sync at Monday night’s African Rhythms class, where grooving is about “sharing love.” (Photo by Anthony DeHart)

encompasses all people.”

The dancers from diverse backgrounds who made up Monday night’s class reflected this legacy.

“We got transplants from all over,” Burch said. “We may have somebody from Africa or New York, New Jersey ... Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill. They come from everywhere.”

No matter where they come from, everyone brings passion and enthusiasm to the class. Even after 15 years, the group continues to learn and grow with the same vigor that bubbled over its first day of class. Far from showing any signs of fatigue, many of the dancers see the class as a time to recharge and take a break from their busy lives.

“We motivate each other,” Allen said. “We feed off each other’s energy. Most of the women here have worked all day, have kids, have families they have to cook for or husbands they have to do stuff for.”

This feeling of rejuvenation keeps people coming back, and the support of other dancers is a good incentive to stay active.

“It’s the energy of all these other women, and the instructors, that helps motivate

you to get your body back active and relieve the stress of life,” Allen said.

As the original dancers and regular

“We motivate each other. We feed off each other’s energy.”

— Venita Allen

attendees reflect on their progress over the past 15 years, they also think about the future. They look to the younger generation to keep the tradition alive.

“It’s multigenerational,” said Suzanna Ochola, a woman who attends the African Rhythms class regularly. “It keeps going because this is where I grew up, you know? I grew up coming here, loving it, breathing it, just like my daughter is here loving it, breathing it. I’m now eight months pregnant. My child hears the drums and comes out knowing it, so it goes generation to generation.”