

Reggaeton dancing provides solidarity for Latino community

Laysha Gonzalez stepped into the dust-filled rehearsal room, exhausted from her day of stressful classes. Her fellow dance club members smiled at her, eager to start working on choreography for their upcoming performance at the University of Texas.

Suddenly, her worries from earlier in the day melted away, and she began to dance Reggaeton.

"Dance has the power to bring so much confidence and energy into your life," said Gonzalez, a liberal arts junior. "Dancing to me is very much like another necessity. It's like water."

Gonzalez said she wanted Latino students to connect with their culture, because she knew how hard it was to be away from her family and roots. So, she founded a Reggaeton dance club in late 2022 to offer a place of solidarity, stress-relief and fun at UT, where about 22% of the undergraduate population is Latino, according to the [Undergraduate School Overview Report](#).

"I wasn't surrounded by my culture or surrounded by people," Gonzalez said. "I told myself, 'I'm not going to wait here until the space is created for me to belong and feel comfortable and be who I am, I'm going to go and create it myself.'"

Gonzalez, who choreographs the dances, said that growing up as a Mexican American meant dance was a large component of socializing and creating memories with family and friends.

"Having Mexican culture running through the blood ... it's a given naturally that music and dancing was a very big portion of my childhood," Gonzalez said.

The Reggaeton Dance Club provides an environment for Latino students to learn to dance, communicate, perform and gain socialization skills, Gonzalez said. The members practice twice a week and learn choreography for up to four optional performances throughout the semester.

"It's good to see how a lot of people who are introverted (are the ones) that are always on stage performing together," Gonzalez said.

Interviews and applications aren't required to join the club, and Gonzalez said people don't need any dance experience or even need to identify as Latino to be a part of it.

"It's really nice to be in an environment where there's no expectation for you," Gonzalez said. "You want a place to belong, sign up and you're in. We want you to be here for yourself and to be empowered by and surrounding yourself by your culture."

Emily Zamora, **communication** sophomore, said she had no dance experience and rarely listened to Reggaeton music, but wanted to connect more with her Latina culture. She said she found confidence in herself through joining the club this spring semester.

"I completely enjoyed the music and the dancing," Zamora said. "I think it is just a really healthy way to get some stress relief from such a stressful week."

[Texas Senate Bill 17](#), which went into effect on Jan. 1, banned higher education institutions from practicing diversity, equity and inclusion policies in **teaching, researching** and for hiring purposes.

Gonzalez said she was worried about Reggaeton Dance Club being singled out by the new bill. However, she said the club hasn't received backlash, and she attributes this to their dancing. She said it's an alternate form of expression.

"A lot of people forget activism and empowerment isn't only in educational spaces," Gonzalez said. "At the end of the day, what brings people together and what is inclusive doesn't have a label, like dance."

Andres Rodriguez, liberal arts senior, said he loved the idea of incorporating one of his favorite Latin music genres into something he could dance to on campus, all while finding a friend group he loves. So, he became an officer in the club in fall 2023.

"This organization embodies the sense of family and belonging because we are all so close to each other," Rodriguez said.

Although Gonzalez only has one year left as an undergraduate student, she said she hopes her work empowering the club and connecting the UT Latino community will carry on when a new president takes over after she graduates in 2025.

"I want to come back 50 years from now and when I ask where the Reggaeton Club is, it's filled with people of all colors and all backgrounds," Gonzalez said. "I just want to give people the place that they deserve."