

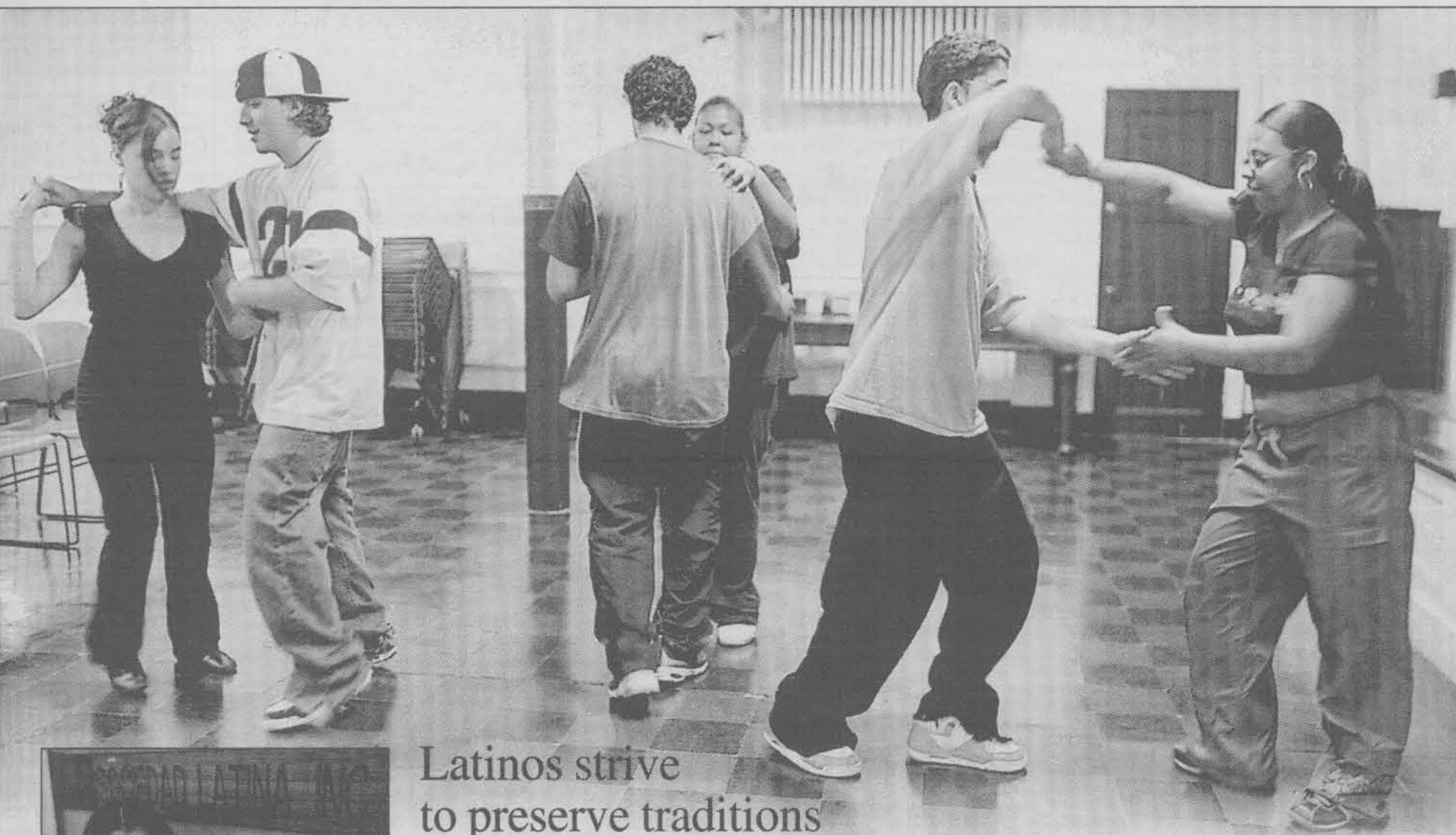
JUST FOR MOM

Use your heart — and maybe your hands — to come up with a truly special gift this Mother's Day.

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STAFF PHOTOS BY GEORGE MARTELL

FINDING THEIR WAY: Zaida Ismatul, left, and Betsi Perez connect with their roots at Sociedad Latina; top, members of Unique Rhythm celebrate Latin culture through dance.

Latinos strive to preserve traditions while adapting to America

Living la vida

By CARA NISSMAN

Gerardo Villacres lives a double life. Although he has resided in the United States for nearly 40 years, the Ecuador native remains tied to his roots.

"I call myself a healthy schizophrenic," said Villacres, executive director of the Hispanic-American Chamber of Commerce in Boston. "The acculturation process often involves a tremendous amount of inner struggle. I went through 25 years of not knowing

how to behave." Villacres is one of about 500,000 Hispanics in Massachusetts — the fastest-growing minority nationwide — striving to hold onto some of the traditions of their native lands while adapting to U.S. customs.

Despite their growing influence on American music, food, television and movies, Latinos are at risk of relinquishing their heritage, said Villacres, who now mostly goes by "Jerry."

"Every immigrant goes through a jour-

ney that involves shock and depression and nostalgia and, ultimately, acculturation and settlement," said Ilan Stavans, the Lewis-Sebring professor of Latino and Latin-American culture at Amherst College and author of "The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America." "You undergo an odyssey of self-discovery and renewal."

For Zaida Ismatul, a Guatemala native who

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STAFF PHOTO BY GEORGE MARTELL

RHYTHM OF THEIR OWN: Andrew Escoto and Emily Cruz, both 16, dance during a Unique Rhythm practice.

Latinos try to balance native, local cultures

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immigrated to the United States when she was 9, becoming "American" meant embracing English, independence and privacy.

"It wasn't until I was fully able to speak English in the eighth grade that I really felt I was becoming 'Americanized,'" said Ismatul, youth coordinator at Sociedad Latina in Mission Hill. "I wanted my diary. I wanted my own room. I wanted to hang out with my friends. In Guatemala, females aren't supposed to step outside the house."

But despite her desire for independence, Ismatul values the limits her mother set.

"I agree that we should give young people a voice and freedom, but I know subconsciously they want to have guidance. Parents need to set boundaries," she said. "My mother did that with me, and I always respected her."

Being able to work to earn her own money gives Betsi Perez a sense of American pride.

But Perez said the dispersal of the American family upsets her.

"I'm 24 and I still live at home and will until I get married," she said. "I think the Latino culture appreciates family more than Americans do."

Gibran Rivera seeks more personal connections in his professional life than most Americans who were born here.

"The lines between the human and the business are significantly more blurry in Latino culture," said Rivera, executive director of Iniciativa — The Massachusetts Education Initiative for Latino Students in Boston. Rivera moved to Massachusetts from Puerto Rico when he was 12. "I think that is a positive thing. Relationships are key."

Although most Latinos find ways to intermingle the two cultures, some find the transition too traumatic.

"A lot of new young arrivals have a lot of angst," said Villacres. "In order to deal with their lack of identity, some drop out of school."

Ismatul said she also has encountered many Latino youths who choose to ignore their roots.

Mexican native Martha Nelson,

who has lived in the United States for more than 20 years, prevented that detachment through dance.

"My children grew up seeing me in my Mexican dresses going so proud to the theater," she said. Nelson started the Mexican dance troupe Xuchipilli, which means the god of dance and love, to expose her children to her culture. "My daughter used to dance with me. My son would sometimes be the DJ."

Villacres said some Latinos worry the new generation will assimilate to the point of losing its first language.

"I knew one young man who was born here and speaks English," he said. "When others in his family speak to him in Spanish, he doesn't understand and they get insulted."

Most of the older generation also denounces "Spanglish" — the mixing of English and Spanish words — as linguistic pollution, Stavans said. But Latino youths are embracing it as a statement of who they are.

"I think there's a 'Latinization' as much as we're becoming 'Americanized,'" said Villacres. "I hope we can give and take positive things."