

Carnival: from Colombia to West Plains, Missouri

By Willow G. Mullins, Missouri Folk Arts Program Intern

In October, St. Louis artist Carmen Dence brought the famous Latin carnival of her hometown, Barranquilla, Colombia, to Glenwood R-VIII Elementary School, just a few miles outside West Plains in southern Missouri. Dence was selected for the residency because of her experience as an artist and educator. She is a Colombian folkloric dancer and choreographer, is co-director of the St. Louis based *Grupo Atlántico*, and a Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program master artist. She is also a Research Associate Professor in Radiology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. As a member of the Missouri Folk Arts Program's pilot school-residency project, Dence spent three days at Glenwood Elementary School, working with students in the fifth through eighth grades. With help from drummer Arthur Moore and dancer Donald Kelly, she taught the students about Colombian dance and culture.

On Friday morning, the last day of the residency, I arrived as observer for the Missouri Folk Arts Program. Sixth-grade students clustered around Dence in the gym as she reviewed the new Spanish words she had been teaching them. During the week, she had been slowly building their vocabulary as part of teaching them not only about the dances and music of carnival, but also about the culture that surrounds the centuries-old celebration. Earlier in the week, she and the students had watched videos about Colombia and the *Carnival de Barranquilla* on the Atlantic coast. Dence taught the students that the indigenous people of the region are of mixed Spanish, Caribbean and African descent, and all of these cultures are reflected in the dances.

Barranquilla's carnival is particularly known for its traditional dances in which costumes play an important part. Many costumes are made in red, green and

yellow to represent the colors of Barranquilla's flag. Bright colors help evoke the joyous atmosphere of carnival; subdued colors and earthy tones are reserved for mourning. Dence makes most of the costumes for *Grupo Atlántico* from traditional patterns and designs, and her closets at home are filled with costumes for the group, as well as for students like those at Glenwood. Some carnival dresses have beautifully embroidered and beaded panels. She works with artisans in Colombia on these designs.

The *cumbia* is one of the most beautiful dances; the women move slowly and spin in long, full, red and white checked dresses that seem to float like flowers in a light breeze. Each *cumbia* dress requires eight to ten yards of fabric and at least fifty yards of lace. These flowing dresses, designed in the style of early Spanish ladies' clothing, also help keep dancers cool in the hot weather. *Cumbias* are often danced on the weekends leading up to carnival and always at night with candles or torches. "The feeling is unbelievable," said Dence, "when you have a live band, and you just don't want to stop dancing." Since the *cumbia* is such a slow dance, she used some of its steps as a warm-up for the Glenwood students.

After the warm-up, Dence asked the children, "Who wants to wear a costume?" They leapt in the air and ran towards the tables covered in bright cloth along one side of the gym. "Me!" they shouted. Soon, girls in long, full, floral wrap skirts were twirling across the floor, while other students adorned in vibrant red, green or yellow ponchos waved equally colorful flags. Some put on jumpsuits and soft cotton masks, transforming themselves into bulls, jaguars and even a devil. Each dancer was given a set of maracas.



Carmen Dence dances the cumbia at West Plains Civic Center. Photo by Kathleen Morrissey

A few students preferred drumming to dancing and joined Mr. Moore in playing one of the many *djembes* (drums) he provided. Dence provided the skirts and the jumpsuits, which she had made herself, though she purchased the masks in Colombia. Cloth masks, like those Dence provided, are made for children who want to participate in carnival. Traditional masks are made of wood and elaborately painted, making them heavy for long days of dancing. In the carnival tradition, these masked *animalitos* dance in front of the *congos* dancers, with their heavily embroidered capes and long headdresses. The *congos* dancers represent an African influence, and their capes, like many of the carnival dresses, are brightly embroidered with flowers and carnival characters.

After a morning of rehearsal, guest artist Eileen Wolfington arrived to work with seventh and eighth graders for both the school assembly and an evening performance at the West Plains Civic Center. Wolfington focused on dances from Mexico and, like Dence, brought along costumes—sombros for the boys and shawls for the girls. For the performances, she had also brought strands of beads and flowers for the girls' hair. The sombros are important not only as clothing but also as an integral part of the dances. Her partner later showed the students two of the fancier sombros that he uses only for performances.



Glenwood students present Colombian carnival for their peers.
Photo by Willow G. Mullins



Masked *animalito* at Glenwood Elementary in West Plains.
Photo by Willow G. Mullins

Friday afternoon, the whole school gathered to find the Glenwood gym transformed into a Colombian carnival. About twenty-five students performed their new dances for nearly 200 of their peers in kindergarten through eighth grade. Dence's students took turns dancing across the gym to the cheers of the other students, while the jaguars and the devil chased dancers and leapt at the audience. Next, the students performed the traditional Colombian Wayuu Indian dance called *chichamaya*, while others accompanied them with drumming, all without any direction from Dence. For

the *chichamaya*, the students wore long caftans and veils that mimicked the traditional woven cloth of the indigenous people. Wayuu society is matrilineal, and the women choose their mates through this dance. After demonstrating another dance and some Caribbean drumming, the students ended the assembly with a parade.

The student dancers gathered again on Friday evening to join Dence and *Grupo Atlántico* for a performance at the West Plains Civic Center. As both students and *Grupo Atlántico* members got ready to go on stage Friday night, one of Glenwood's new dancers asked Eileen Wolfington how to say "good luck" in Spanish. Practicing first with her, he gallantly whispered his new phrase to Ms. Dence as they waited backstage and then offered her a flower, which she tucked into her hair.

Because of the success of the project and with the encouragement of the project teachers, artists and the local arts council, the Missouri Folk Arts Program has applied for a second National Endowment for the Arts grant. If funded, the grant will provide for more school residencies like Dence's and enable the project to create an accompanying educators' guide.