

INCREASING AWARENESS THROUGH MY PASSION FOR THE ARTS

by

Bina Amin

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Bina Amin

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Approved by:

Tara Kermiet and Dennis McCunney

(Student Affairs-Student Involvement and Leadership: CLCE)

As we meet more people in our day to day lives, we come to notice that we are more different than we are similar. However, it's these differences that seem to bring us closer to one another. Varying cultures play a large role in these differences and cultural awareness is more needed today than it ever has been before. My passion for dance has allowed me to increase cultural awareness on East Carolina University's campus and continue to educate students and faculty on an important part of my heritage, while also providing cultural, mental, and physical awareness in the dancers of the team. Raas is a North Indian folk-dance that originates in the state of Gujarat in India. ECU Raas is a dance team that was created on campus in the spring of 2015 by a freshman student who wanted to see more of her own background and heritage on campus through the form of dance. Being a recognized Predominantly White Institution (PWI), East Carolina University's ability to welcome different groups, like ECU Raas, and advocate for cultural awareness is absolutely necessary to increase the diversity of our campus. Since the beginning of my freshman year in Fall 2015, I have served as the captain of the team. Through my four years of leading the team, I have seen how my love for Raas has increased cultural awareness not only on campus, but also in the dancers and their appreciation for their cultural roots. Each individual on the team has been able to increase their understanding of their rich ethnicity and proudly embrace their culture on campus. The team has strengthened cultural diversity and has encouraged inclusivity since it was established. Since its creation, ECU Raas has competed and placed at multiple national dance competitions. Additionally, the team has given back to our local community through various events. ECU Raas hosts the annual Dil Se Naach Bollywood-Fusion charity dance competition every February, has engaged in multiple presentations across campus and has left a lasting impression at our university and its dancers.

In the past, I had physically seen the growth the dancers had experienced from being on the team. I even had dancers come to me and verbally express their gratitude for me continuing to lead this team, because it allowed them to de-stress, share their culture, or help their mental state. This Fall,

when individuals auditioned and made the team, in order to understand the growth they experienced, I had them take a survey. The survey asked the dancers why they decided to join the team and what they hoped to gain from their experience. I gave a post-survey as the competition season came to a close this Spring semester, in order to truly quantify this growth. I asked them what they learned and actually gained from being on the team. These surveys showed that dancers achieved their initial goals of “finding themselves”, “expressing their culture”, getting out of their “comfort zone”, learning how to “cope with stress” and building “close family-like relationships”.

I spent this Fall semester not just choreographing a dance to showcase during the Spring, but also spending time introducing the dance and really helping the team understand the rich history behind the dance. I taught dancers to be more culturally aware of their presence on the team and to understand why they do what they do for the team. Additionally, this year as well, we as a team hosted the annual DSN competition, along with participating in class presentations in the Anthropology Department. In addition to this, this school year was the first full year that ECU Raas had the privilege of being a Club Sport. Through this platform, I demonstrated how my leadership in putting together a close-knit team has increased cultural, mental and physical awareness, not only for the dancers themselves, but also cultural awareness for the ECU community. We went from being a small team 4 years ago that only performed at local Indian events to being one of the only established cultural groups on ECU’s campus this year. We now perform at a variety of events and are often invited to different showcases on campus like Cultural Explosion and Culture Fest. In fact, many individuals reach out to us, when we don’t perform at certain events, and state that they missed our presence. We went from being a random Indian group on campus to students and faculty being aware of us and sharing interests in the dance/dress/culture.

My final creative project was putting together a dance video/performance that was appreciated, in a cultural sense, to those who got the chance to experience it. There is a lot that goes into choreographing a cultural dance style especially when you want the viewers to be engaged and not confused or bored. I hoped to share a little of that through this project. My love for the dance began when my parents convinced my sister and I to join The Federation of Gujarati Associations of North America (FOGANA) when we were younger. Through this, we met multiple days a week practicing for a national dance competition that we would attend in varying states each summer. We travelled to Kansas, Boston, Texas and California. I used to spend most of my time at dance practice and all of my friends came because of dance. My life revolved around this style of dance when I was younger and continues to be a major part of it through my engagement in Raas here at ECU. Creating the dance doesn't just involve teaching everyone a routine. Raas was more than a movement of the body, unlike most other dance styles. Raas competitions required a performance, almost like a production. I first recruited our team and focused on team bonding, because not much can be done without the support of your dancers. Then, I chose a theme for our performance this year. I chose Bachelor Party as our theme because, with us being the only all girls team in the national Raas dance circuit, it was unique and feasible to our team only. I then focused on song selection and choreography. Choreography and actually teaching the choreography to the other 13 members, was the longest part of the process. After all, you are only as strong as your weakest link; or in our case, dancer. Lastly, we worked on costumes, props, and the background to help tell our story and help us become performance/competition ready. The whole process was truly rewarding. I saw a random group of 14 girls transform into a family and just a few aspects of dance become a performance; a production. I witnessed growth and awareness in each of the dancers and our ECU campus, whether it was cultural, mental or physical.

Although my long-term plans are to pursue a career in the field of medicine as an Emergency Department doctor, I think that the main focus of this project will come with me everywhere

I go. It is necessary to share the importance of embracing one's own culture. It is even more important to accept and be aware of all cultures, heritages, and ethnicities, when necessary. As a doctor, I plan to share my differences, traditions and experiences with my co-workers and patients in order to provide an open platform for them to feel comfortable to respond in. I want the patient to feel of optimal comfort, no matter what culture or background they have. The dedication and drive put into implementing a dance competition and creating a performance (to the level of collegiate competition) will also stick with me in expressing my drive and worth ethic. Sharing my love for dance, and encouraging others to partake in it, will continue to help others mentally, physically, and culturally. Dance is truly a conversation between the body and soul and I'm thankful to have used it as a means to create a positive impact on campus and on the dancers of the team.