

BY MINDY RAYE HOLMES

Dancing the night away in Southern California gives youth from 12 stakes an opportunity to enjoy performing with others holding their same standards.

12 Dancing Stakes

On a warm July evening, 2,500 young Latter-day Saints from Southern California congregate next to the football stadium at the University of Redlands. It's 20 minutes before showtime on opening night, and the youth dressed in colorful dance costumes are excited to perform their dance festival show after two years of planning and months of dance practices.

One group of youth begins to clap and chant "It's dance time" as they cheer. All around them other participants are practicing their parts alone or with partners.

Soon they all line up to go into the stadium, and after the prayer and opening number, all 2,500 of them flow onto the field. The California Dreamin' dance festival has just begun.

During the next two hours the youth move across the field performing dances like the waltz, cha-cha, and swing to live music performed by other youth and adults. When it's over, the crowd cheers and the dancers hold their heads high, grateful for the opportunity to participate in this great event.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MINDY RAYE HOLMES



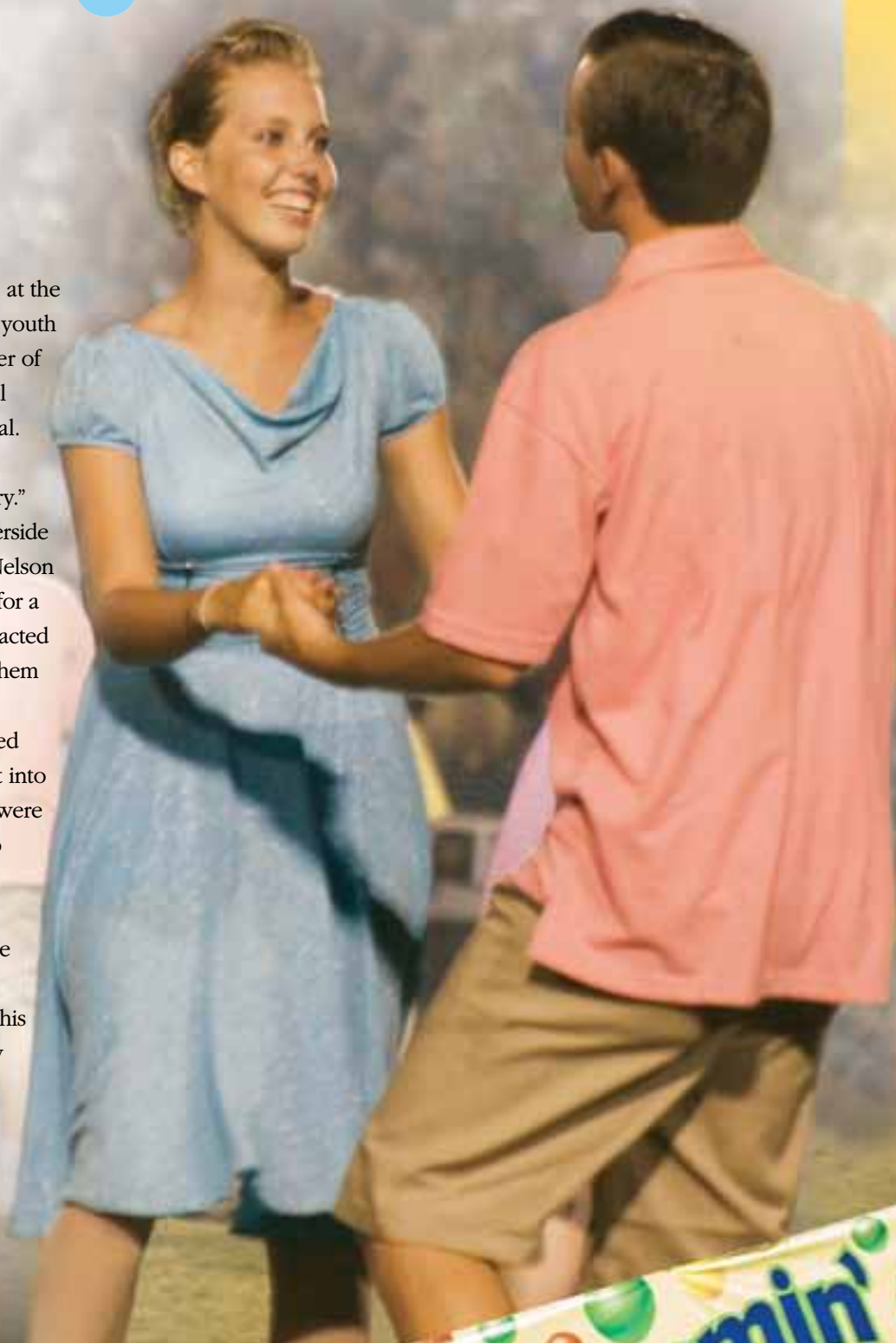
A Rare Opportunity

The last regional dance festival in Southern California was held in 1985 at the Rose Bowl, where more than 13,000 youth participated. Jim Nelson, the organizer of the California Dreamin' dance festival remembers watching that 1985 festival. "I was just overwhelmed," he recalls. "That festival just stuck in my memory."

Years later as a member of the Riverside California Stake presidency, Brother Nelson suggested a dance festival as an idea for a multistake youth conference. He contacted other stakes in the region, and 12 of them decided to participate.

Many of the youth who participated were reluctant at first, but as they got into practices and met new friends, they were grateful for their leaders' decisions to join in the festival.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing," says Carlos Rodriguez, 17, of the Sun City Ward in the Menifee California Stake. "They only do this once in many years, and it's pretty cool for us that we get to do it."





YOUTH ACTIVITIES

"I am an advocate for such events. They enable our youth to participate in something they truly find unforgettable. The friendships they form and the memories they make will be theirs forever."

President Thomas S. Monson, "Welcome to Conference," Ensign, Nov. 2008, 6.

Following the Prophet

After so many years since the last regional dance festival, the leaders of these stakes were inspired by a 2004 letter from the First Presidency that encouraged local leaders to hold multistake events. The letter noted that cultural events gave youth "a sense of unity and opportunities to develop friendships."

"Our prophet wanted us to do things like this, and doing this is a great chance to follow him," says Akita Lagazo, 14, of the Banning Ward in the Yucaipa California Stake.

Kim Sandstrom, 16, of the Redhawk Ward in the Temecula California Stake thinks she knows why the Church would encourage activities like the dance festival. "I think as a whole we weren't doing enough activities all together like this," she says. "Church leaders realized so many people were drifting, and they thought these activities would help."

Finding Strength in Numbers

That help has come because the young men and women who participated had their testimonies strengthened by being around other members of the Church their age.

"I was surprised to see how many people were here," says Corbin Turner, 12, of the Rolling Ridge Ward in the Chino Stake. "It's nice to know that it's

not just us, but there's a bunch of other youth here with us."

Fellow ward member Dallas Parker, 13, agrees. He says the dance festival "has helped to strengthen my testimony because

I know there are more people out there than just us that are willing to live up to the standards we live up to."

Many of the dance festival participants say they were surprised to learn there were so many members of the Church their age living so close by. Knowing they are not alone gives them the strength they need to not only learn new dances, but to accomplish other things in life.

"If you really want to achieve something and get somewhere with the standards that you have, it helps to have so many other people around you doing it," says McKenna Lawler, 17, of the Butterfield Stage Ward in the Temecula California Stake.

A Learning Experience

Putting together a dance festival for 2,500 youth was no easy feat. It took a lot of effort from hundreds of adult volunteers who organized, chaperoned, and taught dances. It also required a lot of hard work from youth who learned new dances although many of them had no dancing experience.





Beth Houghtaling, 18, of the La Sierra Ward in the Jurupa California Stake said learning the waltz for the dance festival was “a really cool experience. Now I’ll always know how to do the waltz, and that’s something I’ll take with me.”

Because of their experience in the dance festival, the participants not only learned new dances, but also life skills that will help them in other endeavors.

“You learn to rely on others a lot,” says Samantha Fokken, 16, of the Menifee Ward in the Menifee California Stake. “If one person doesn’t show up, it could mess up the whole dance.”

Michael McKhann of the Foothill Ward in the Jurupa California Stake has learned that “hard work pays off, because you’re going to end up with something great.”

With more than 2,500 youth dancing on the field, making friends, and strengthening testimonies, the California Dreamin’ dance festival turned out to be just that: something great. **NE**

