

# DANCE FOR LIFE

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It's a quiet Sunday evening on the deck plates of the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN 71). As Sailors aboard enjoy their holiday routine, the sound of drums and ukuleles emanates from the ship's fo'c'sle. Air Traffic Controller 1st Class Jolyn San Nicolas dances across the deck. She is wearing a flower-patterned fabric wrapped around her waist. Her every movement is carefully executed with gracefulness and fluidity. A row of students behind her follow and imitate her every move.

San Nicolas is teaching Hula and Tahitian dance. They are styles of dance that originate from Polynesia and involve singing, chanting, and full-body movement. Some of the dance numbers vary from intense and fast-paced to slow and graceful.

San Nicolas has been practicing Hula and Tahitian dance since she was 15 years old. She performed at various hotels and shows in her home island of Guam for tourists and locals alike.

San Nicolas' interest in dance began when she saw photos of her older sister performing. A year later she started taking classes.

"I remember seeing photos of her at the age of eight dancing at local parties with the Hula and Tahitian group she was with," said San Nicolas. "That inspired me in a sense. That sparked my interest."

She made a friend who was an instructor at Jimmy Dee's Paradise, a popular live show involving Hula and Tahitian performances, who gave her an opportunity to perform, but she would have to get permission from her mother.



"I was attending a Christian school where my mother was employed at," said San Nicolas. "She didn't feel comfortable knowing that being a performer would require me to show a lot of skin due to the costumes involved with show business."

San Nicolas' mother's disapproval did not end her desire to join the show. After a year of trying, she convinced her mother to give her the green light. An ecstatic San Nicolas immediately became a dancer for Jimmy Dee's Paradise.

"My mother felt more comfortable knowing that the wife of the business owner was her high school classmate," said San Nicolas.

San Nicolas performed at Jimmy Dee's Paradise for three years. The feeling of performing in front of a crowd brought her joy. Being on stage gave her an opportunity to express herself.

"One day, our troop was hired as entertainers for a rally," said San Nicolas. "I performed a Hawaiian hula solo in front of hundreds of people. I'm mostly a reserved person and prefer not to speak out in a crowd, but once the music began, I start telling a story with my hands. There's just an overwhelming feeling of passion that takes over."

Since joining the military, San Nicolas keeps that passion by performing during celebrations and special occasions.

"In 2009, when I was on the USS Bonhomme Richard (LHD 6), we had a vast number of islanders and others who were interested in learning dances from Samoa, Hawaii, Tonga, Guam, and Tahiti, so much that we were able to put on a full-fledged Luau show at the end of deployment," said San Nicolas.

Her experience dancing with her fellow shipmates motivated her to start a class. She began teaching at the end of her second tour in Naval Air Station Lemoore in 2013.

San Nicolas transferred to TR in August 2017. She started teaching a weekly Sunday class in November 2019.

"I've never been great about going to the gym, but this class is so enjoyable. It distracts me from the exercise and everyone involved is chill and non-judgmental," said Electrician's Mate (Nuclear) 2nd Class Mclane Mares. "She's very passionate about what she is teaching and the history of each of the styles we learn."

During the one-hour class, San Nicolas teaches basic Hula and Tahitian dance. Her students learn a number of songs varying in speed and intensity.

As students gain confidence practicing, San Nicolas plans to invite them to perform at command-hosted events, such as "Culture Shock" in March or Asian-American Pacific-Islander Heritage Month in May.

"Being able to see how people who are new to the dance developed through the lessons brings me so much joy," said San Nicolas. "If they feel comfortable with the dances by the month of May, we would like to utilize them in the performance."

San Nicolas' passion reflects who she is as a person. Her class motivates her shipmates to learn and experience something new and get a good sweat while doing it. Her passion and enthusiasm inspire her students to express themselves.

"I saw her perform while underway in a solo performance and was blown away," said Mares. "I remember thinking, if there's any chance I could learn to dance like that, I'd take it in a heartbeat."