

The Dance Of Life

Like the Persian folk dance that Niosha Nafei Jamali's young Bay-Area students perform in the round, Jamali's life has come full circle. She first learned the steps in secret dance lessons in Tehran, Iran, when she was 12. She longed to teach them to others, but it was too risky. "Under Ayatollah Khomeini, dance was illegal and considered pure evil," she explains.

It wasn't her first encounter with danger. Her father, who taught English to foreign diplomats, had been detained and interrogated more than once. Jamali had been suspended from school for reciting poems that weren't in line with government restrictions on free speech. And when she was 15, thugs splashed acid on her from a passing motorcycle, apparently in retaliation for her father teaching English. "It burned right through my clothes," she says, revealing a scar on her left forearm. "That's when we knew it was time to leave." The family received political asylum in California. At 25 Jamali married a fellow émigré and could finally achieve her dream of having a school where she could share her native dances.

In 2002, when she was 30, Jamali was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and given a 40 percent chance of survival. "I was too weak to dance for a year," she recalls,



"but I decided that if I lived, I would make it my mission to fight cancer." As her health improved, she began fund-raising and has never stopped.

Now 37 and feeling strong, Jamali trains about 150 students, mostly the children of Iranian-Americans, in Persian dance and culture, as well as philanthropy, via her Niosha Dance Academy. They raise about \$20,000 each year for cancer causes, mostly from performances and relay walks. Half goes to the American Cancer Society and half helps provide medications for pediatric cancer patients in Iran.

Jamali also spreads her love of dance to her sons, who are 9, 7 and 4. "Dancing makes me feel light," she says, "and I love to teach kids to experience that lightness."



Niosha Nafei Jamali (above) and some of her students (top) keep alive the native dance traditions that were banned in Iran as "evil"

WORDS OF WISDOM

"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Anne Frank, who would have turned 80 on June 12