

# Summer Nightly Indian Dances: Where culture, traditions merge

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The distant sound of drums beating, voices singing of prayers and thanksgiving, the aroma of fresh frybread lingering in the air in downtown Gallup can only mean one thing – the Gallup Summer Nightly Indian Dances are underway once again.

Marking its 34<sup>th</sup> year, the always anticipated Summer Nightly Indian dances are held nightly at the McKinley County Courthouse plaza from 7-8 pm Monday through Sunday, sponsored by the City of Gallup and Chamber of Commerce.

In the beginning, the event was held at the Red Rock State Park and attracted mostly tourists to the park's museum and trails. Today, it not only attracts tourists from all over the world, but it entertains many locals as well according to Nightly Indian Dances Director Teri Fraizer.

"The visitor numbers are steady, we see many more visitors outside the U.S. this year, and we are grateful to those who attend nightly," she said. "Now that summer has officially arrived and more people get out on the road, we should see increases in attendance."

The goal of the dance program as it relates to the city, and chamber tourism efforts, is to have visitors stop in Gallup, catch the dances and spend the night.

"Our specific program mission is to help promote economic development and tourism for the City of Gallup by providing a safe, high quality, educational, and cultural venue for all visitors to the Richardson Courthouse Plaza." she said.

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Fraizer supervises three ambassadors, three sound engineers, two emcees, and seven groups this summer. Involved since the beginning, she still looks forward to working with the groups and attending nearly every evening.

“I have the best crew this side of the Rio Grande,” Fraizer said, “Through the hard work of Bill Lee at the Chamber of Commerce, Mayor McKinney, and Jennifer Lazarz from the city, we have been able to secure more lodgers tax funding for the staff and dancers.”

One group that has been a major attraction for more than 30 years is the, Cellicion Traditional Zuni Dancers, from Zuni. Directed by Fernando Cellicion, he says they enjoy dancing, and meeting people from around the world.

Cellicion’s group consist of Ray Johnson, Belyle Johnson, Calela Lamy, Alexandra Nastacio, and Florentine Johnson.

“This has become so popular and its good exposure for tons of people to share our culture and dances,” Cellicion said. “It’s a very important program for the City of Gallup, the vendors selling their crafts, and it’s a friendly event. In fact, some people come even though they’ve came many times, they just want to see it because they enjoy seeing the many dances done each night.”

Twenty-two-year-old group member Alexandra Nastacio has been dancing with the Cellicion group since she was 5, and has become an icon at the nightly dances as well as for the “New Mexico True” campaign. Her regal image can be seen on tabletops at local area restaurants and a billboard along Interstate 40.

Nastacio says she is excited to represent her group as well as her tribe of Zuni Pueblo.

“I feel great dancing for the people that come to our show, and I feel proud that they choose me.” Nastacio said.

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The Cellicion group has done so well that group leader Fernando Cellicion will be receiving the New Mexico Music Commission's Platinum Music Award at the Lensic Theatre in Santa Fe on July 21, for his contribution to the Native American music genre.

"The Platinums" are an evolution of the New Mexico Music Commission's Platinum Achievement Awards, established in 2013 to celebrate the role that the music industry plays in the cultural life and economic success of New Mexico.

"I feel honored and overwhelmed. I received one similar in 2012 at the House of Representatives in Santa Fe, but this one is going to be pretty exciting to receive." Cellicion said.

Dawn Lujan, an ambassador for the summer nightly dances, was approached by Fraizer several years ago, asking her to come aboard.

Lujan says she loves her role, and it's a wonderful way to introduce the public to the Native American culture that this area is so rich in.

"I've been doing this for the past three years and I love it ... it gives me the opportunity to meet with people all over the world and locally, and to let them know the good things that are happening in Gallup," Lujan said, "I think that we need to get the word out to local people, to see what we have to offer, the positive side, the culture; if more people knew about it they would get a better idea of what the Native American tribes have to offer."

Summer dance visitor, Tina Pablo from Lake Valley, said she enjoys the dances and believes this event helps keep the culture alive.

"I think it's really good and how they keep the culture going by these various dances and seeing not only my Dine' culture, but others as well makes you proud to be a Native American," she said.

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Also believing the nightly dances are a beautiful way of showing one's culture through songs and dances is Fran Henry of Gallup.

"The dances are an expression of one's belief and culture ... colorful and deep. I love it ... great company, great weather," she said.

Free to the public, the summer dances run until Sept. 4.

***Visit: [www.nightlyindiandances.com](http://www.nightlyindiandances.com), [www.thegallupchamber.com](http://www.thegallupchamber.com), or contact the Chamber of Commerce (505) 722-2228 or toll free (800) 380-4989.***

***By Dee Velasco***

***For the Sun***