

## Performer Shares Heritage through Dance

Stone Mountain Resident in National Spotlight for Native Dance and Storytelling

By [Theresa Woodgeard](#) June 8, 2011



**Jaramillo performs Aztec dancing in his arts in education program at International Festival.**

When [John Jaramillo](#) performs, it's impossible not to notice the joy on the faces of the audiences he engages. A group of noisy kids turn up their faces merrily howling in response to his wild "aoooooh" during the tale of "Coyote Blue," a Pueblo story he adapted for the stage that was passed down from his grandfather.

A crowd of joyful participants eagerly jumps in to follow his lead in an Aztec Friendship Dance inspired by the powwow two-step. The crowd smiles and dances to the rhythmic beating of the drums.

Enthusiastic fans surrounding the Flamenco dancer shout encouragement while he moves with razor precision and pride through the Spanish dance. The staccato movements of his heels stir the air into a frenzy.

"That connection is not something you can get unless someone brings it to you," said Jaramillo. "I reach for those things that help people connect and express themselves."

A performing artist and teacher since 1983, Jaramillo presents education programs on Aztec Dances of Mexico, Flamenco dances of Spain and Native American Storytelling. He brings his art to schools, theaters, festivals, colleges and art centers throughout the U.S. and has performed in Ireland, Mexico and Spain.

Using theater arts to connect to schools' language arts programs, he is on the roster for Young Audiences Woodruff in Atlanta, Cleveland, Ohio and New York City. He also works with the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta in the Wolftrap Early Learning Through the Arts.

A native of New Mexico, Jaramillo, is a full-blooded Native American born in Isleta Pueblo. Although he began studying two dimensional arts at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, it wasn't long before he became interested in dance and theater.

While he studied all forms of dance — modern, jazz, ballet and theatre, it was the Spanish guitar that drew him to Flamenco. "I became entranced. The music really struck a chord and spoke to me."

"I bring my Pueblo culture into my work," he said. Currently he and his wife Therra C. Gwyn are working on a theater piece, "Kokopelli's Traveling Tales" based on one of his favorite characters. The legendary hump-backed prankster, healer, story teller and symbol of rebirth dates back more than 3,000 years and is sacred to many southwest Native Americans.

When he met Gwyn, who writes the popular animal rescue column for Patch, she was working as a publicist for Young Audiences. It was love at first sight, she recalled: "The minute I saw him I knew I was going to marry him."

Indeed, within a short time they were seeing each other on a regular basis and were soon married. Today they live on an acre in the Stone Mountain Redan area with their dogs, cats and chickens.

For fun, the couple likes to throw themselves into nature. "We like visiting places where you can't tell what century it is," Jaramillo said.

You might say the same for his art. Jaramillo embodies each persona so completely that as he performs, the actor seems to vanish into thin air. "Theater is a connection to the sacred for me. I'm always looking for that link to the spirit," he said.