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Drummers beat thundering rhythm at Asian-American Festival

Taiko drumming, kendo demonstrations part of showcase of Asian community in Tulsa

By Stetson Payne Tulsa World Jun 4, 2017 0





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Rhees Lane stood at the front of the crowd, two one-inch thick wooden drumsticks in his hands waiting to cue the rest of the group. He draws back and strikes the taiko drum's head, rolling into a deafening roar that reverberates through the building as other musicians join in.

Lane leads Ohitsuji Taiko, a Japanese percussion group based out of Owasso's Bailey Elementary School, where Lane is a teacher. For its members, now fifth- and sixth-graders, the 15th Annual Asian-American Festival at Martin Regional Library on Saturday was their last show together until returning fifth-graders meet again in October.

Lane said the festival is an important chance for students and the community to learn.

"It's really good for the kids because they get to have an audience that spans not only the community, but Tulsa as a whole," Lane said. "I think it's a great opportunity to celebrate Asian culture and immerse the kids in something they may not be familiar with."

The group, which Lane said translates to "Ram Drummers," performed several songs to start the festival. Taiko drumming dates back more than 1,500 years, and Lane said he first picked up on it while teaching in Arizona.

"They had Matsuri, which is similar to our Asian Festival, and they had a huge taiko group," Lane said. "I was able to go up on stage and play a taiko drum with them."

"There were so many drums on stage playing that I got tunnel vision, and I was hooked."

None of the group's drums are store bought. All of them are hand-made using Lane's knowledge and

a grant from the Owasso Education Foundation. Lane said not only are the drums cheaper to build, but there's also a value in taking the time to manufacture an instrument.

"Seeing it take shape, putting your heart and soul into it then hearing it come together," Lane said. "It's a real joy and it's very satisfying."

Fourth- and fifth-graders audition in October for Ohitsuji Taiko and practice after school through the rest of the year. Lane said everyone learns to read and speak music in the program.

Taiko drumming is also physically demanding with some choreography involved, but Lane said there's nothing more cathartic than pounding a taiko drum after a stressful day.

The festival also featured booths, belly dancing, a traditional Japanese tea ceremony and tai chi. Jason Patteson, the festival's chairman, said the event aims to feature parts of the world he said otherwise might not get recognition.

"It's just a way to highlight a culture that not what everyone in Tulsa thinks about being a part of Tulsa," Patteson said. "But it's been a part of Tulsa for a very long time."

After the thundering taiko drums faded, things only got more intense on the library's main stage with a performance from Tulsa Kendo Dojo.

Michael Lindsay and Shaw Furukawa locked eyes from behind their metal face masks. Each of them held a hollow bamboo sword called a shinai, staying light on their feet and shouting to call their strikes.

Lindsay said kendo is Japanese two-handed fencing, but its physicality is only half the challenge.



“It comes from sword fighting,” Lindsay said. “But it’s a method of personal improvement and character development.”

Lindsay and Shaw, who both founded the dojo in 2006, sparred a few feet in front of the crowd while taking questions about kendo’s history.

The whole time, Lindsay and Shaw trade hits. Shaw said kendo involves as much trust and respect in the process as it does strength and focus.

“There’s kind of a saying that reaching perfection might be impossible,” Shaw said. “The idea of us reaching that level of understanding might not be physically possible, so it’s an ongoing struggle.

“I’ve been doing kendo since 2004, and I feel like I’m just beginning.”

After a demonstration with the dojo’s members, Lindsay, Shaw and other instructors allowed children to take practice strikes with the shinai.

With every crack of bamboo rattling off a face mask or armor plate, it’s a chance to share kendo’s values with new people. For Lindsay, it’s the reason the dojo comes out to perform at the festival.

“It’s wonderful. I can’t really express it in any other terms,” Lindsay said. “It’s like inviting everyone to your block party. We get to do the things that make us happiest, and we get to share it with the community.”

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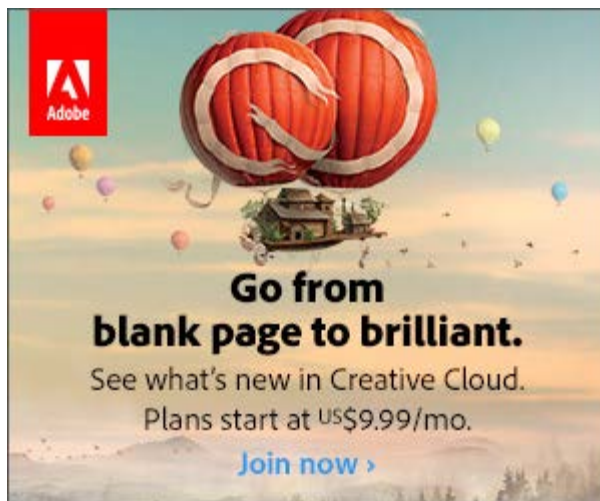
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