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Ravi Peruman

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"Intense, life-changing, fun!" That only begins to describe the Fifth Annual Bharata Natyam Summer Camp held in July/August at the beautiful Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville in Virginia, US. Forty children and young adults from many states (and one from Hong Kong) participated in the month-long Natya-Ady by the renowned dancers/founders of Bharata Kalanjali Academy of Fine Arts in Madras, Sri and Smt. V.P. Dhananjayan, assisted by their disciple, the renowned dancer, choreographer and resident instructor at Yogaville, Padmarani Rasiah. The camp's power comes from a dual focus on dance and the religious dimensions that enfold and empower it. "So often girls are exposed to dance only, without the culture, the samskara," shared Sri Dhananjayan. "We are able to tell them about our culture, and through the dance we are able to influence them about our Sanatana Dharma. We try to integrate life with the dance."

The girls all responded to the holistic approach. "To us, camp is more than just a four-week trip to Yogaville," said Madhulika Nataraja of Gaithersburg, Maryland. "It affects our entire lives. We learn more than just dance. We learn music, yoga and theory, but beyond that, we learn some very important lessons about life." A typical day lasts from 6am to 10 pm, and includes exercise, practical instruction, theory, choreography and repertoire classes, nightly bhajan and even homework! Classes are in Sanskrit. Memorizing slokas of the root dance scripture Natya Shastras is mandatory. Fundamental to the camp's success is its traditional gurukulam structure. "It's the environment," says Sri Dhananjayan. "They are totally cut off from city life, television, junk food-all that is totally away from them. They are staying together as a gurukulam. From morning 'til evening they are with us, so that

direct influence is there."

"I have learned about sharing and cooperation by staying with 35 very different students," admits student Anuradha Subramaniam of Potomac, Maryland. "We all get along and help each other with everything. I have also learned about Indian heritage and its culture." That is the stated goal. "Culturally," says Sri Dhananjayan, "this camp is to make the children identify with India and with Hinduism. Through the dance we are trying to inculcate that sort of spirit in them which I am sure is influencing others, including the parents. I frequently get letters from parents saying their children have changed their attitudes and behavior. They are very happy with the whole transformation." "This dance camp has been an overwhelming experience for me," penned Tejal Asher of Eters, Pennsylvania. "It has taught me discipline, dedication and devotion towards the art. I have learned how to respect my gurus and also my culture and religion." Nandini Gandhi of Sacramento, California, loved it: "Day-

by-day the experiences, the lectures, and the sweat pieced together until dance was no longer just movement, it was an art. I came face to face with the unbelievable fact that this month, this fraction of a year, has the power to change a lifetime."