# Ballroom culture: a sanctuary for LGBTQ communities of colour



Every Saturday between 1 and 5pm, the Washington Neighborhood Center in Sacramento, California, transforms into a party. Known by insiders as a place to practice voguing and foster community, this gathering plays a significant role for Black and Brown LGBTQ individuals. The centre comes alive with house beats and dazzling choreography, creating a safe and supportive space for expressions of identity and culture.

Ka’lonji Escada, a central figure in this community, embodies the spirit of the ballroom scene. As the mother of the Kiki House of Moschino and a member of the Iconic House of Escada, she is pivotal in fostering this environment. Escada recalls her first ball experience in Dallas, Texas, in 2021, noting the distinct "ballroom time" where events often start late, giving participants ample time to prepare. “Femme queens [need] time to get ready,” she explains.

Described by Escada as “gay church,” the ballroom event’s atmosphere resembles a fervent congregation with its stomping, clapping, and dynamic interactions. It’s a microcosm of society viewed through a queer Black lens, involving fashion runway categories, voguing, and performances that transcend binary gender identities. Participants compete for trophies, and winning elevates social status within the community.

Escada started her ballroom house in Sacramento in 2021, driven by the inconvenience of travelling to Oakland for balls. With The 916 Is Burning, a ball created with a few friends, she established a Kiki ballroom scene in Sacramento. The Kiki scene, a more youth-oriented and less intense version of ballroom, provides an entry point for emerging talents.

Jenesis Diwa, a member of the House of Escada, shares how ballroom became her lifeline. Growing up in a small town with few queer and trans people, she found community and empowerment through ballroom, eventually moving to Sacramento in 2023 and becoming a significant figure in the Kiki scene. Diwa, a social worker for youth, notes that ballroom has given her a sense of community and inner strength.

The historical roots of ballroom extend back to the late 19th century when William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved man, hosted private balls. The modern ballroom scene emerged in the late 1960s, with Crystal LaBeija founding the House of LaBeija to create inclusive spaces for Black trans women.

Today, ballroom houses function as chosen families, offering emotional, physical, and financial support, crucial for queer youth who face significant risks of homelessness. Diwa, reflecting on her journey and current role, says, “Ballroom has saved my life.”

Escada notes that the ballroom community must not lose sight of its founding purpose amid growing competitiveness, where prizes can reach $25,000. She emphasises the importance of maintaining a supportive space for those who need it most.

Embodying resilience, Diwa’s experience on Trans Day of Visibility highlights the ongoing challenges faced by the community. She and her friends were attacked, and while the incident was traumatic, it spurred her to seek better protection for her community through initiatives like Sacramento Pride Intersectional Community Empowerment (SPICE).

Ballroom enthusiasts like Xo’Lei Diaz and Sean Anthony also attest to the physical and mental fortitude cultivated through the culture. Voguing, described as a challenging sport, builds strength and confidence. Anthony, a leader in Vogue Buffalo and known as Salsa Dior Garçon, emphasises the importance of the ballroom community in providing support and resources, noting its transformative power.

"I really believe ballroom is revolutionary," Diwa states, underscoring the profound impact the culture has on its participants and the broader community.