

Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh



Teaching young ballroom dancers
poise, self-confidence and teamwork

By KIMBERLY FLAHERTY

It's not often that you see elementary school children willingly and enthusiastically dancing the merengue, fox trot, rumba, tango and swing.

But if you had visited St. Benedict the Moor, Holy Rosary, St. Agnes or St. James schools this past spring, that's exactly what you would have seen. From March through May 2010, fifth-graders from the four schools participated in a unique learning experience called Dancing Classrooms.

Dancing Classrooms began in 1994 in New York City under the direction of Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau, directors of American Ballroom Theater. It is now an international program serving more than 40,000 students.

While lauded as one of the most effective methods of teaching social dance, the program encompasses far more than mastering dance steps.

Dancing Classrooms is designed to provide an atmosphere that allows students who are typically introverted and reserved to step out and shine. It focuses physical energy and increases health through the joy of movement. It builds self-esteem and interactive social skills as it improves children's confidence and ability to relate to others.

Mercy Behavioral Health introduced Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh in fall 2009 as part of its prevention program. With Pittsburgh Public Schools as its first partner, Mercy Behavioral Health engaged 300 children from six public schools in the inaugural semester.

On the heels of that success, in spring 2010, four Catholic schools supported by the Extra Mile Education Foundation adopted the Mercy Behavioral Health program: St. Benedict the Moor in Pittsburgh's Hill District, Holy Rosary in Pittsburgh's East End, St. Agnes in the city's Oakland neighborhood and St. James in Wilkinsburg.

Eighty Catholic school students learned classic ballroom and Latin dances from local instructors Rozana and Terry Sweeney, both international champion ballroom dancers. Dance classes were incorporated into the curriculum from mid-March through late May. At the conclusion, dancers proudly demonstrated their newly acquired skills to parents, teachers and other classmates.

The Sweeneys, owners of Art and Style Studio on Pittsburgh's South Side, were specially trained to serve as instructors for Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh and taught all students





Students from St. Agnes School in Pittsburgh's Oakland neighborhood participate in the Dancing Classrooms program.

from Pittsburgh public and Catholic schools with measurable results.

Along with teachers, principals, parents and Mercy Behavioral Health employees, the Sweeneys agree that Dancing Classrooms has a perceptible and positive impact on participating youngsters.

"It's so rewarding to see the changes in their demeanor through dancing, how the children help each other, interact with each other," said Rozana Sweeney. "This experience has been better than any world championship I've ever danced. It's beautiful."

McAuley Ministries, the grant-making arm of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System, made funding for Dancing Classrooms in the Catholic schools possible.

Based on the success in Pittsburgh to date, Mercy Behavioral Health is already working to expand Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh to additional schools this fall.

For more information on Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh, contact Mark Rogalsky, prevention services supervisor, Mercy Behavioral Health, at 412-320-2321.

Mercy Behavioral Health is part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System and Catholic Health East, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. For more information, visit www.pmhs.org or call 1-877-637-2924.

Flaherty is public relations coordinator for Mercy Behavioral Health.

Children encouraged to dance

Hill Dance Academy Theatre has varied programs

By AYISHA MORGAN-LEE

The city of Pittsburgh has been experiencing a Renaissance and revitalization of Downtown and neighborhood businesses, in its beloved sports teams and in the cultural arts throughout the city.

One of its newest cultural arts nonprofit public charities is Hill Dance Academy Theatre. HDAT's mission is to develop and train dancers in black dance traditions, expand knowledge and contributions of black dance traditions, and create emerging dance artists who will sustain dance in the black community.

The mission targets children who would not otherwise dance because of racial stereotypes, gender stereotypes, parental/family bias or the inability economically to afford dance. HDAT is living its mission as a community-based program located in the historic Hill District, by sustaining dance in an area that once offered some of the best cultural venues in Pittsburgh.

Ju.B.Lation Spirit Filled Feet is a multi-genera-

tional, liturgical dance company that uses sacred dance as the artistic voice to celebrate cultural and spiritual traditions of the black church experience.

HDAT's programs provide a holistic approach to the art of dance by offering classes in all styles and genres of dance such as ballet, African, tap, hip-hop, jazz and salsa. Classes touch on all the areas that support the artistry of dance such as physical fitness, nutrition, visual arts, music, theater production, photography, costuming, dance etiquette and more.

Programs are designed to support students who want to dance as well as to develop and encourage, at a young age, a love for the arts in its varied forms. Students see, know and value that they can move with grace and style no matter the race, body type, shape and style.

HDAT dancers have performed spiritual and prayerful liturgical dance presentations at local Catholic churches.

For more information on the academy, call 412-508-9574 or go to www.5678hdatt.org.

Morgan-Lee is founder, chief executive officer and artistic director of Hill Dance Academy Theatre.

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