

Swingtime!

Inner-city fifth graders learn self-respect, civility and teamwork through ballroom dancing

by Bette McDevitt



HOW OFTEN DOES A FILM YOU'VE SEEN in a theater lead you to do something big, really big? In 2005, four Pennsylvanians — Jane Brooks and Joyce Burd in Philadelphia and Mark Rogalsky and Barbara Rudiak in Pittsburgh — saw the documentary film *Mad Hot Ballroom*, the true story of how ballroom dancing changed the lives of students in New York City schools.

The four left the theater, each thinking the same thought, “We have to have this program in our schools.” Five years later, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh have both instituted the programs into their schools, and hundreds of inner-city children are dancing like the stars, and learning discipline, civility, and respect in the process.

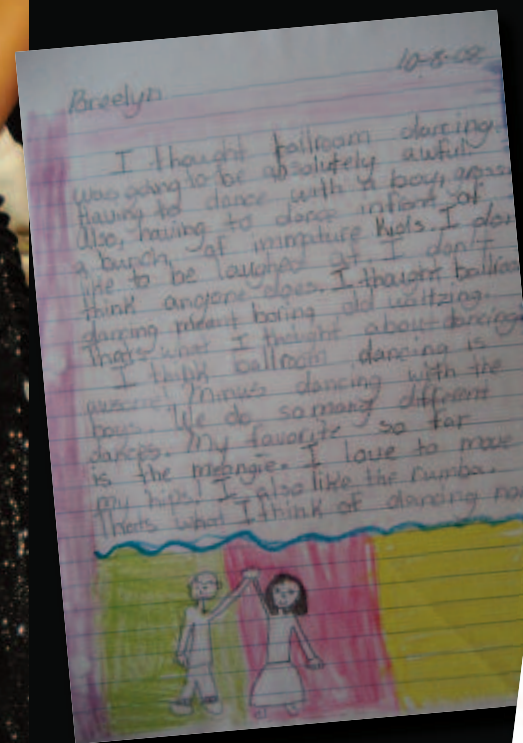
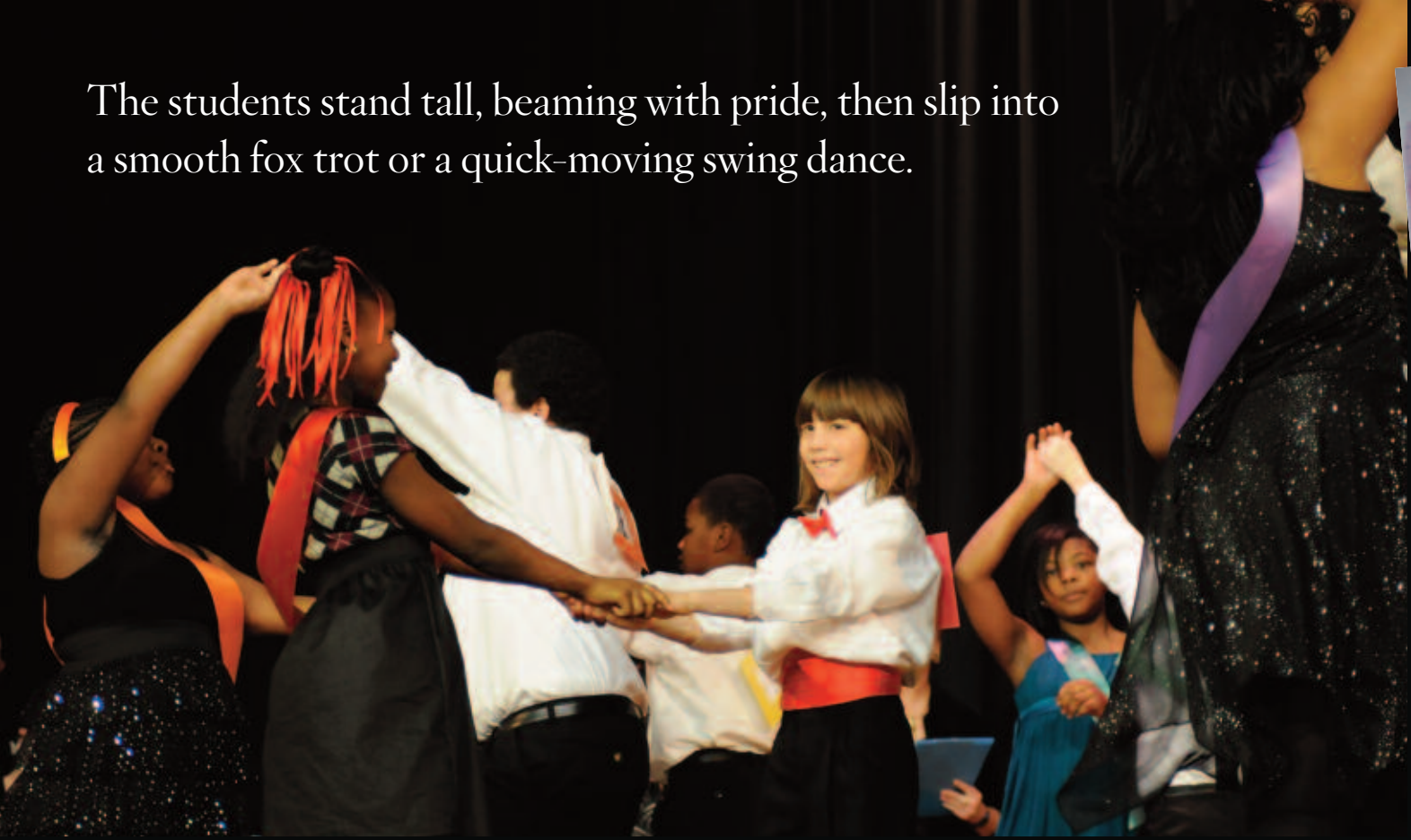
Fifth graders in these city schools are among thousands across the country taking part in a program called Dancing Classrooms. The program's origins date to 1994 in New York City, when Pierre Dulaine, a ballroom dancing master, first taught a fifth grade class how to dance. Now, under the direction of Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau, directors of American Ballroom Theater Company, the initiative has brought dancing to more than 47,500 children in 525 schools in 19 cities.

LEARNING LIFE LESSONS

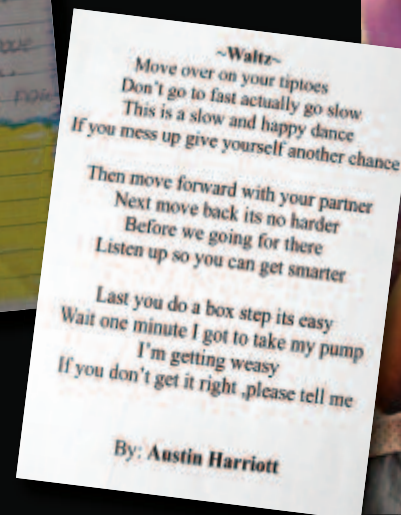
Participating schools select and send local teaching artists to New York City to undergo intensive training with Dulaine to learn his carefully crafted method of teaching children to dance. The ballroom dances taught to the students

Cali Shealey and Declan Walkush, both attend Pittsburgh Phillips K-5, helped their team win the gold medal at the competition which capped off the inaugural semester of Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh.

The students stand tall, beaming with pride, then slip into a smooth fox trot or a quick-moving swing dance.



Students in Dancing Classrooms Philly expressed their experiences in the program with artwork and a poem.



(top) At Dancing Classrooms Pittsburgh final event in January, students demonstrate what they've learned throughout their 10 weeks of instruction. (bottom) At their semifinals competition at St. Richard School, students concentrate on their technique.

consist of a selected and sequenced list, including merengue, fox-trot, rumba, tango, swing and waltz.

More important than the dance syllabus, however, is the teaching of civility, manners, and respect for self and others. Self-esteem, confidence and teamwork are nurtured throughout the 10-week in-school residency. Dulaine calls the program "life lessons wrapped around ballroom dance."

After viewing the film, Brooks and Burd sent an e-mail inquiry to Dulaine. "From there, things moved quickly," recalls Brooks.

What started in Philadelphia in the fall of 2007 now operates in 35 public, charter and Catholic schools across the city. Thus far, Dancing Classrooms Philly has reached nearly 5,000 children in Philadelphia.

Brooks and Burd, who are co-directors of the Philadelphia program, and their Senior Teaching Artist Bess Witcosky visit the schools often during the semester. "It's magical," says Brooks. "We took the training, so we dance along with the children. We see them at the beginning when they don't want to participate or even touch each other. By the end, I will watch a young man nudge a girl's arm and make eye contact, and together they achieve a beautiful posture. As many times as I go to the schools, seeing this transformation never loses its magic."

In Pittsburgh, the program was put into place in 2009 by Rudiak, assistant superintendent for the city's elementary schools, and Rogalsky, prevention services supervisor with Mercy Behavioral Health, part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, which already had a working relationship with the school district.

Last fall, Dancing Classrooms founder Dulaine traveled to Pittsburgh to kick off the program with students from six participating schools. After greeting them with a loud "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," he called for volunteers to come on stage and within 15 minutes had them dancing the merengue.

"Shake it, baby!" he called out, his French accent providing a cosmopolitan twist. "Children, I just realized that you're not the only ones. Your teachers are going to shake it, too!" Soon, everybody, even those who claimed to have two left feet, were on the floor dancing.

A month later, Phillips School on Pittsburgh's South Side, one of the six schools participating in the program, held a Halloween party and dance in the school gym for third, fourth and fifth graders. Rodney Necciai, Phillips principal, recalls, "There were a couple people dancing, but mostly the students were chasing each other around the room."

But, then the gym teacher put on some merengue music, and a few fifth graders grabbed a partner and began to dance. "Pretty soon, without a spoken word, every fifth grader was on the dance floor," says Necciai. "What was astounding was not only the dancing, but the rest of us, the children and the parents, just watched, awestruck, and applauded."

The nimble-footed fifth graders then showed off their dance skills doing the rumba and the swing dance.

Fifth graders come in all sizes, temperaments and stages of development, and boys this age are typically more resistant to dancing and actually touching and interacting with girls. "Our boys went along with it really well," says Necciai, "but one little fellow was bawling the first day. He was complying but crying. On the last day of the program, he was bawling, but this time hugging the dance teacher and crying because the program was over."

SWEET SUCCESS

Each school finds a way to fit the program into the school day, usually as part of gym or music classes, twice a week for 10 weeks. The children meet with the trained teaching artists, and the music and gym teachers provide assistance.

Rozanna Sweeney grew up and learned to dance in Berlin, Germany, and she and her husband, Terry, are international ballroom champions. "But nothing," says Sweeney, who is a teaching artist,



(top) Dancers strive to put their best foot forward in a tight competition in Pittsburgh and one in Philadelphia (bottom photo). The dancers compete as parts of a team rather than as individual pairs.

along with Terry, at the Pittsburgh schools, "compared to what we did with these children. Dancing, you are doing for yourself, but for both of us, this was something we did for humanity. You give these kids a little glimpse of choices that will change their lives."

At the end of the 10 weeks of dance classes, participating schools hold a contest called Colors of the Rainbow and send their 12 best dancers to the next level of competition.



“When they picked the 12 kids for the finals,” says Rudiak of Pittsburgh, “one of the principals explained that only so many can go out on the field, kind of like the Steelers. The others supported those who were chosen, critiquing them and offering positive reinforcement. That is the culture that this program created.”

At the finals, the girls wear sashes in the color assigned to the school they represent, and the boys have cards in the same color pinned to their backs. Some of the Pittsburgh schools bought suits for the boys and shimmering dresses for the girls to wear at the dance competition. During the dances, shirttails come out and ties go crooked, but it only adds to the sweet vulnerability of the children.

In the final competition, the judges choose a school, rather than an individual couple, as the winner, and every school receives an award, ranging from gold to bronze.

Wherever the students perform, the audience is enthusiastic, and sometimes boisterous, as the dancers stand tall, beaming with pride, before slipping into a smooth fox trot or a quick-moving swing dance.

Everyone connected with the program has a pocketful of heartfelt stories to share. “We had a little boy who didn’t talk, but he obviously loved dancing,” says Brooks of Philadelphia. “He worked really hard at it and was chosen to be in the semi-finals. The young lady he danced with was a head taller and a phenomenal dancer. I thought to myself, not

Dressed in their finest, students from six Pittsburgh Public Schools perform in front of an enthusiastic audience of family, friends and teachers. (below) A Philadelphia student came up with an effective reminder of how to perform the Rumba.



only is this wonderful, but the fact that she danced with him like he was Fred Astaire was a valuable lesson for that young lady. She never let on that he was not a great dancer.”

Sweeney of Pittsburgh recalls the success story of an autistic girl who participated in the dance program. “The staff told me that she didn’t want to be touched,” she says. “But she started participating completely, touching too, and she would become annoyed when the boys didn’t place their hands properly. She would move their hand to the small of her back. For me, it was proof that dancing can help with any issues.”

The dancers perform all over their respective cities, including at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and at Pittsburgh’s City Hall. When they arrive at their destination, the children climb out of buses and go right to work dancing, with no rehearsal.

“These kids could roll out of bed at 2 a.m. and start dancing,” says Sweeney. “It’s in their muscular memory.”

The mission of Dancing Classrooms is “teaching children to take a bow.” It can’t happen too many times.

—Bette McDevitt of Pittsburgh is a regular contributor.