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Dance class lets special needs kids shine

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Joanna Marcano prepares to execute a step in her modern dance class. Joanna's a student of Thomas Armour Youth Ballet, which offers inclusive classes to children with disabilities.

Joanna Marcano sashays across the room of the dance studio, stretching out her legs while trying to mimic a step instructor Crystal Peattie demonstrated moments before.

She smiles as she dances to tunes from the likes of R&B star Jennifer Hudson at a dance studio located inside a housing development run by the Homestead Housing Authority.

"It's fun," said Marcano, an 18-year-old with developmental delays who has been dancing with the Thomas Armour program since 2005. The program offers inclusive classes that allows special needs students to train alongside others to learn ballet, modern dance and tap, and has locations the Redland, South Miami, Morningside and Coconut Grove.

The classes have helped Marcano with her cognitive skills, said her mom.

"I think it has helped a lot with her coordination and it helps a lot with her thinking skills too because she has to think about what it is that she's going to do and how it is that she's going to do that movement," said Sonia Marcano, 47, of West Kendall.

Marcano said her daughter had tried dancing at another studio, but was disappointed when instructors separated her from other students.

"She started dancing with another studio, but we honestly didn't like it," said Sonia Marcano. "They weren't really interested in her inside the classroom."

Marcano said she met dance teacher Natalie Axley shortly after pulling her daughter from that program, and followed her to Thomas Armour in 2005. Axley, a 45-year-old with more than 20 years experience teaching dance, had been Joanna Marcano's ballet teacher for nine years, until this summer when the shy teen was encouraged to take up modern dance with Peattie.

"When she first came, I ended up doing private lessons for a long time because when she gets nervous her concentration can break down," said Axley, whose students also include a deaf girl and a 6-year-old whose cancer is in remission. "But, maybe because she likes it, she actually excelled more than kids who have more potential; who don't want it."

Sarah McCaffrey, like Marcano, is Axley's student during the school year, and also joined the modern dance class this summer.

"She literally couldn't walk when I met her. Now she's in class doing ballet and she even does tap," said Axley, who lives in Kendall. "She used to put her shoes on for only 10 minutes because of the pain, but now she does an hour in tap."

With the increasing popularity of several dance shows airing on major TV networks, more people are turning to dance as a fun, physical activity to get in shape.

But instructors say there are other benefits to dancing, especially for children with special needs. High on the list is helping children with disabilities develop a routine at a young age and having them participate with other kids, which would help them become more comfortable in social settings.

"We believe in a universal design that challenges our teaching approach to be inclusive and challenges the student to achieve his or her personal best," said Geannina Burgos, Thomas Armour's program administrator. "We agree with the current thoughts on education that inclusion, whenever possible, is preferable to separation just as it is in everyday life."

Thomas Armour is one of four non-profit dance programs receiving funding through the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs' youth arts grants that actively offer inclusive classes for kids with disabilities, said Francine Anderson, chief of arts education at the county department.

Daysi Cepeda, a dance instructor of 25 years, owns Creativo Dance Studios with two locations in Coral Gables and Kendall. Cepeda also teaches dance classes at the Miami-Dade College's Kendall Campus, and said she trains about 150 students a month.

Cepeda, who has a son with a special needs, and currently counts an autistic child and another with developmental delays among her students, said dancing helps in developing their self esteem.

"They develop coordination, social skills and learn to be comfortable and accepted in the classroom environment," said Cepeda. "In addition, they feel accomplished when they learn the steps I teach them."

"At first it was very challenging," said Sarah, 12, a Homestead resident, who's been dancing for a year. "But it's actually really nice, especially when I finally get a move down. I simply just like being with friends and I like the art of dancing," she said.

Sarah was born with Cavus foot, a deformity that causes the foot to have an abnormally high arch. Mom Lia McCaffrey said Sarah has had surgery to reduce the arch, but still lacks the balance other children have. Dancing has helped in strengthening her daughter's feet, she said.

Peattie, a Thomas Armour instructor for three years, said having an older brother with a disability has helped her understand how to relate with her students with disabilities.

"I expect more out of them because I know they can," said Peattie. "So I think it's very important to just welcome them into the group and not make them feel like they are different or special or not special. Just treat them like anybody else."

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