

# give

TWIN CITIES

2017

## A BRIGHT FUTURE

Minnesota nonprofits  
making a difference

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Blythe Brenden-Mann  
Foundation

# ... HEART OF DANCE

In the band room of Harambee Elementary in Roseville, a gaggle of fifth graders huddles around dance instructor Bonnie Inveen, whose graceful gait reflects decades spent gliding across ballroom dance floors. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she says, inviting her students to find a partner and assume the “pancake position” where pairs face each other palm to palm. A student helper pushes go on the CD player, and the room erupts in a sonic staccato of Latin merengue music punctuated by the rubber-soled squeak of sneakers shuffling against the floor.

The dancers’ bodies sway like tippy canoes as Inveen calls out movement cues: “Red light, green light, starburst!” When it’s time to change partners, Inveen invites the students to give each other a “high 10” and there’s a clap of slapping palms.

Nearly every fifth grader at the school participates in a program called Dancing Classrooms, popularized by the 2005 documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*. Over the course of 10 weeks, these “ladies and gentlemen” in training learn a variety of social dances including merengue, fox trot, polka, rumba, waltz, and tango.

There are 30 Dancing Classrooms sites all over the world; Minnesota is among the program’s newest (and fastest-growing) hubs—and the only one in the upper Midwest. Ballroom dance enthusiasts Ember Reichgott Junge and Andrea Mirenda co-founded the nonprofit organization Heart of Dance to bring Dancing Classrooms here to Minnesota.

“This was a combination of two of my passions: dance and human services,” says Reichgott Junge, a former Minnesota state senator and attorney who took up ballroom dancing as a hobby. She and Mirenda, a professional ballroom dancer, wanted people who wouldn’t normally attend classes at a dance studio to experience the physical and emotional benefits of social dance. Since launching in the fall of 2015, they’ve reached more

than 1,700 students in 24 schools across the metro. They’re hatching plans to expand to Duluth and Rochester in the fall.

Harambee’s principal, Kathy Griebel, sees the confidence-building benefits of Dancing Classrooms firsthand. Griebel—who herself took up ballroom dance as a hobby a few years ago—credits the twice-weekly dance lessons with coaxing her students “to take a risk and try something that is a little bit scary” and overcome their fear.

The transformation from reluctant to enthusiastic doesn’t happen overnight. The biggest hurdle for students to overcome is their discomfort with touching another person. Take 11-year-old Brandon Kwatang: He thought that social dancing was “weird” at first and says he wasn’t used to touching people’s hands for that long. Now he’s a natural at





the pancake position. Brandon's favorite dance is the fox trot, and sometimes he even shows off his dance moves to his family.

Inveen, the instructor, empathizes. "When I was in the fifth grade, it would have been very difficult to even stand in front of a partner to dance," she says. "They're afraid to show that maybe they like that person in the class, or that they'll be teased if they dance with each other. They're starting to understand relationships and connections."

As the class winds down for the day, Inveen invites her students to vote on which dance to do for their finale. A thicket of hands shoots up. Heel-toe polka wins the vote, followed by the macarena. In a couple of months, these

Heart of Dance participants performing after many hours spent practicing with instructor Bonnie Inveen.

students will don suits and dresses and perform the dances they've been learning in front of the entire school, including their parents. Inveen has seen how this culminating performance can

mark a turning point. "Once in awhile, I'll get a student that hated it the whole time and at the end says, 'I want to be a professional dancer.'"

In the spring, the winning Dancing Classrooms team from each school around the metro competes in a city-wide competition. Last year, Harambee Elementary won third place. A smile widens across principal Griebel's face as she remembers the victory. "It was the first trophy our school has ever earned. And I love that it was in dance."

--> [heartofdancemn.org](http://heartofdancemn.org)

## ... VOCAL ESSENCE'S LULLABY PROJECT

*Hey Ivory, guess what?*

*You're driving me nuts.*

*But I'm gonna love you no matter what.*

*Because of you, I'm determined to do,*

*better in life, yes, better in life.*

*I never knew what love was until I had you.*

*I want you to know that I will never doubt you,*

*I love everything about you, your smile,*

*Laugh, and chunky chipmunk cheeks...*

**T**ristiana Coffee, a student at Minneapolis' Longfellow Alternative High School for teen parents, penned this song for her daughter, Ivory, in collaboration with the Minneapolis choral group VocalEssence. Since 2015, about a dozen Longfellow students have received a very personal introduction to music composition through the local choral group's Lullaby Project.

