

# Dancing with the fifth-graders

## Duluth's Raleigh Academy kicks off new ballroom dancing program

BY ANDREA BUSCHE

At the start of this school year, Raleigh Academy students undertook an industrious challenge. They proudly became Duluth's first school to partner with Heart of Dance, a Minnesota nonprofit that brings the benefits of ballroom dancing to fifth-graders through the global program Dancing Classrooms.

For 10 weeks last semester, all Raleigh fifth-graders danced their hearts out, becoming proficient ballroom dancers along the way.

### DANCING CLASSROOMS

While ballroom dancing is wildly popular today, we'll need to back up a bit in order to understand the full story. Back in 1994, Dancing Classrooms was launched in New York City by world champion Latin dancers Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau. A nonprofit project of the American Ballroom Theater Company, Dancing Classrooms is an arts program teaching ballroom dance to the upper elementary and middle school students of participating schools throughout the five boroughs of New York City.

It is simply amazing to watch these young people learn elegance and teamwork through dancing. For this and many other reasons, the program continues to succeed today.

### 2005 WAS A GREAT YEAR

Moving along the continuum of interest in ballroom dance, the award-winning documentary "Mad Hot Ballroom" was introduced to the world in 2005. This enlightening film highlights the impact that Dancing Classrooms has on its students, showcasing the transformation that occurs from the first day of class to the final competition.

Continuing the 2005 theme, the wildly popular TV show "Dancing with the Stars" premiered in 2005 and is still going strong today. This show has been successful in introducing millions of viewers to this elegant and classy sport.

### DANCING AROUND THE GLOBE

From Hollywood to New York City and everywhere in between, it seems the entire world has become besotted with



Raleigh Academy students put their ballroom dancing skills on display in November. (RALEIGH ACADEMY FACEBOOK PHOTOS)



dancing. There are 30 sites across the globe participating in Dancing Classrooms. Minnesota became the 30th site when Heart of Dance became the licensee for Dancing Classrooms in Minnesota. Duluth and Rochester are the newest Minnesota cities this year.

### HEART OF DANCE

In 2015, two Twin Cities-based women, Ember Reichgott Junge and Andrea Mirinda, joined efforts to create Heart of Dance. An amateur ballroom dance student, as well as a former attorney and Minnesota state senator, Reichgott Junge has a business-oriented background. Mirinda is a professional ballroom dancer, educator and coach. While the women clearly have different backgrounds, they both share a passion for ballroom dancing.

“From my time as a state senator, I have worked to improve academic opportunities for children,” Reichgott Junge said. “I have always supported the arts, as well. I’ve seen how dance can bring new life to people with mental health challenges, or joy to those confined in wheelchairs. And, as an amateur ballroom dancer myself, dance has been a great addition to my own life.”

Together, Mirinda and Reichgott Junge remain co-presidents of Heart of Dance.

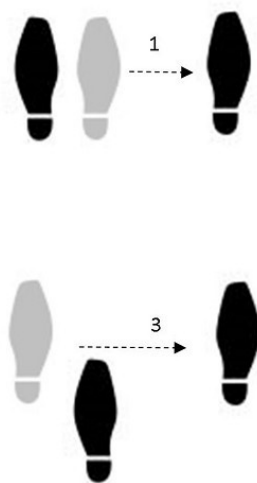
### DULUTH CONNECTION

Recently, Duluth connected with Heart of Dance, and now has a program of its own. Andrea Kuzel is a passionate dancer and dance advocate living in Duluth. She has owned and operated Superior Ballroom Dance Studio for the past five years. When she heard about the Dancing Classrooms program, Kuzel dreamed of incorporating it right here in Duluth.

“I really wanted to bring Dancing Classrooms to schools in Duluth,” she said. “Thankfully, I was able to convince Ember and Andrea that Duluth needed a program.”

Kuzel’s dream came true in 2017, when Raleigh Academy became Duluth’s first participant.

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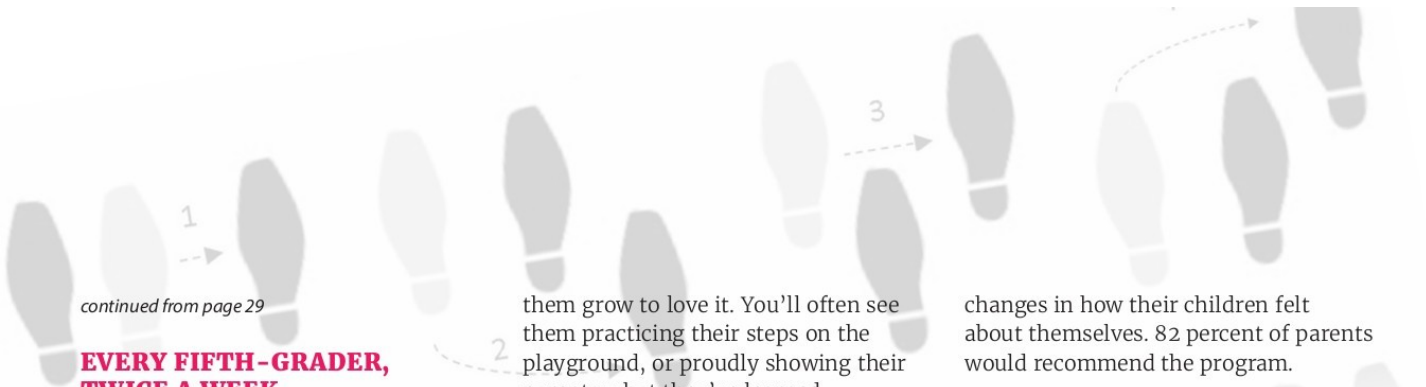
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### EVERY FIFTH-GRADER, TWICE A WEEK

Kuzel is known as a “Teaching Artist,” which is Dancing Classrooms’ term for dance instructor. Last semester, she and her partner, volunteer assistant Sonja Vogen-Baertsch, traveled to Raleigh on Mondays and Wednesdays, where they taught back-to-back classes of 25 students per class. This meant that every one of Raleigh’s 50 fifth-graders participated in the program.

Best of all? There is no cost to the child or their family, and all instruction is built right into the school day.

Kuzel and Vogen-Baertsch taught their students the Merengue, Tango, Rumba, Foxtrot, Waltz and Swing during the 10-week, in-school residency. They also helped classroom teachers coordinate the dances with other subjects, such as social studies, math, English and art, so it fit seamlessly with the rest of the curriculum.

### GENDER RESPECT A PRIORITY

While many of the children don’t enjoy the dancing at first, most of

them grow to love it. You’ll often see them practicing their steps on the playground, or proudly showing their parents what they’ve learned.

During instruction, the children are referred to as “ladies and gentlemen,” to reflect the behaviors expected of them. Above all, the program stresses inclusivity and gender respect. Students are considered teammates, and there is no “leading or following” done by either partner. If a child identifies differently than their birth gender, that is respected, too.

The three overarching goals for the kids include respect, teamwork and elegance, but they often absorb so much more. “Through building confidence, getting to know each other, reaching a goal and having fun, dancing makes their lives better in so many ways,” Kuzel said.

### POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Reichgott Junge shared some statistics included in the most recent Annual Report of Heart of Dance:

92 percent of principals and 81 percent of teachers saw a positive change in the way the children treated each other during the program

75 percent of parents saw positive

changes in how their children felt about themselves. 82 percent of parents would recommend the program.


### HOPEFUL FOR EXPANSION

Everyone involved in Heart of Dance has big dreams for growth and expansion. And this includes Duluth. “My goal is to have every single fifth grade in Duluth signed up,” Kuzel said. “I want to make Duluth the Ballroom dance capital of the world.”

While further expansion would certainly require the addition of more Teaching Artists, Kuzel will always be remembered as the person who brought the program to Duluth. “Dancing Classrooms would not be in Duluth without Andrea Kuzel,” Reichgott Junge said. “It was her passion and perseverance that brought us to Duluth, and we are just thrilled to be here.” —

**MDT**

*For more information, please visit [heartofdancemn.org](http://heartofdancemn.org), email Andrea Kuzel at [andrea@superiorballroomdance.com](mailto:andrea@superiorballroomdance.com) or Ember Reichgott Junge at [emberrj@heartofdancemn.org](mailto:emberrj@heartofdancemn.org). Interested parents or teachers are encouraged to contact Ember and speak to their principals about the program.*



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