

How ballroom dance can bring students together

Written By: *By John Molseed jmolseed@postbulletin.com | Nov 28th 2018*

When fifth-graders at Riverside Elementary School began learning partner dance, Principal Matt Ruzek expected to see some benefits for students. The actual results surprised him.



Gage Elementary School students Jaiden Hirvela, 10, center left, and Becca Bennett, 10, center right, show off their ballroom dancing skills with fellow students from Gage and Riverside schools during "Dancing With Heart, A Free Fundraising Event" Tuesday at the Kahler Apache Hotel in Rochester.

When fifth-graders at Riverside Elementary School began learning partner dance, Principal Matt Ruzek expected to see some benefits for students.

The actual results surprised him.

"The most significant change was the development of community in the whole grade level," Ruzek said. "We see them participating that way at academic activities and even at recess."

The dance classes are part of an artist-in-residence program called "Heart of Dance." Classes are held twice a week over 10 weeks, and students learn six different partner dances. The program is funded by the organization and the Rochester School District.

Heart of Dance leaders, donors, volunteers and school officials gathered for a "Dance with Heart" showcase and fundraiser Tuesday at the Kahler Apache hotel ballroom. The event included dance demonstrations by fifth-graders from Riverside and Gage elementary schools.

Aaden Crockett, 10, a Riverside fifth-grader, said the lessons were disappointing at first.

"The girls would pull their hands away," Crockett said.

However, he and his partners soon began working together.

"It's like another sport," he said. "You have to work together — you can't do it by yourself."

Crockett said his favorite dances are the merengue and rumba because they're faster.

Sonita Chea, 10, a Riverside Elementary School fifth-grader, called partner dancing a different experience from hip-hop dancing, which she referred to as "regular dancing."

Chea said she was at first reluctant to dance with her male classmates.

"You just don't want to touch them," Chea said.

After the course, she came to a conclusion:

"It's not like boys have cooties," Chea told the luncheon crowd. "Boys are just the same as girls, only different."

Chea's favorite dance is the waltz because it's elegant and slower.

"It makes me feel like a princess," she said.

Although the program literally puts students through the paces of partner dances, they come away with more than dance moves. The students learn respect for their dance partners, teamwork and a bit of elegance, said Andrea Mirenda, Heart of Dance Minnesota creative director.

"Once you do it, you want to do it more because you feel more confident," Chea said.

The classes are structured so every student dances with every other student.

"It makes a huge difference in how they treat each other," said Ember Reichert Junge, co-president of Heart of Dance Minnesota.

"It was fun dancing with every kid in our class," said Akon Amoot, a Gage Elementary School fifth-grader.

Ruzek initially didn't anticipate how much of an effect it would have on students. Now, after three semesters of dance units, he said he has watched students grow their confidence and respect.

This was the third semester of the program. Since it started, about 600 students from 24 classes at five schools have taken dance classes.

Rochester Area Foundation donated \$10,000 from multiple donors to the program. Donations and district funding keep the classes available at no cost to students.



Riverside Central Elementary School student Aaden Crockett, 10, speaks as fellow student Sonita Chea, 10, looks on during "Dancing With Heart A Free Fundraising Event" for Heart of Dance Tuesday, Nov. 27, 2018, at the Kahler Apache Hotel in Rochester.