
MINNESOTA

DANCER

September 2017



Gordon Bratt Dancing with His Daughter
at the 2017 Twin Cities Open

Photo by David Chin Photography



Heart of Dance: Dancing Classrooms

One Classroom Assistant's Delightful Experience!

by Leslie Koepke

"Five, six...please begin!"

A petite 5th grade "lady" comes to class with downcast eyes, almost too shy to say her name. Ten weeks later, she enters class smiling and cheerfully helps her teammates practice dance patterns.

A 5th grade boy who has difficulty staying on task learns the "gentleman" dance patterns with ease and stays focused -- as long as he is dancing!

"Actors Warm-up! Shake your right hand and count upward for 16 counts. 1,2,3,4,5..." It's obvious some of the dancers are still learning numbers above 10 in English.

A school principal comes to class and learns the Meringue with his 5th graders. After he leaves, one gentleman says, "I wanna be like Principal Bass -- he's got the MOVES!"

After the Culminating Event at one school, when the 4th graders are asked who wants to learn the dances when they become 5th graders next year, all hands shoot up!

One of the 5th grade gentlemen crosses his fingers for good luck, closes his eyes and whispers, "please let us win; please let us win!" as he

waits for team results at the Colors of the Rainbow Team Match. His school doesn't win, but he leaves smiling and says they did their very best.

These are just a few examples of how the Heart of Dance "Dancing Classrooms" curriculum impacted fifth graders as they participated in the ten-week dance program last year. But, the experience of being a volunteer Classroom Assistant in the Dancing Classrooms program impacted me just as much - if not more so! How, you might ask?

I've been a social dancer for about ten years. Dancing brings me great joy, improves my physical coordination, enhances my brain's flexibility, makes me laugh, and has introduced me to a creative, kind, and fun community. So, last summer when I heard Joyce Thompson talking about Dancing Classrooms and the need for volunteers, I said: "Sign me up!" I chose to volunteer as a Classroom Assistant (CA) at two schools near my home, and offered to participate in two classes per school for a total of four hours each Monday and Wednesday...for both fall and spring "semesters". It was a BLAST!

Being sort of an "academic nerd" who taught child development at

one point, I appreciate that the Dancing Classroom curriculum developed by Pierre Dulaine is based on the question: what is developmentally appropriate for 5th graders? What are the cognitive, physical, and social skills that 10-11 year old children are to acquire, and how can dance be integrated in their curriculum so they master those skills? Too often dance is an "add-on activity" for students without connecting it to other aspects of their development. By incorporating geography, history, culture, math and other skills/content, Dancing Classrooms is a developmentally appropriate curriculum that enhances 5th grade students' overall education. What's not to like about that?

But, more importantly, what 5th graders benefit from (as everyone can whether we are dancers or not) is mastery of the core values upon which the Dancing Classrooms curriculum is based: we treat one another with respect, civility, politeness, and we become helpful team players. Although I try to model those qualities in my social dancing, through volunteering for Dancing Classrooms, they've become firmly embedded in my interactions on the dance floor and in my daily life. It's been a character-building experience for me as well!

So, you might ask, why would someone want to be a Dancing Classrooms volunteer?

-Did I say... because it's a BLAST?

-Because you get to influence little people's lives... little people who may not be members of your family, but who are part of our greater community and need the influence of competent, caring adults in their lives.

-Because you get to see challenges faced bravely by 5th graders that would fella some adults.

-Because you get to see 5th graders change from saying things like: "but do I have to TOUCH her?" to willingly offering their arms for "escort position".

-Because you get to see little kindnesses develop among classmates.

-Because, sometimes, a 5th grader will ask to dance with YOU!

-Because you will see a class learn to work together and help each other.

-Because you get to be silly, laugh a lot, and "shake what your mama gave you"!

Okay... If I'm thinking about being a Classroom Assistant, what is required?

-Attendance at a meeting with other volunteers where an orientation to, history and mission of the Dancing Classrooms program is explained. At that meeting, you'll participate in some dancing, you'll be introduced to terms used in the curriculum that reinforce the expectation of respect and teamwork ("Ladies and Gentlemen"; "Escort position"; "Dance frame please"; "Inside circle/Out-

side circle" and one of the students' favorite: "Shake your buttons!")

- You will be asked if you can make a commitment of time for the 10-week program at a school (or schools) of your choice. Although many CAs are retirees, other commitments (family, travel, work, volunteering elsewhere) are not uncommon. If you need to miss classes for those obligations, that's understandable - just know that the 5th graders will notice your absence!

- Completion of a background check clearance to be able to interact with minors.

-Dance attire for gentlemen CAs includes slacks, a long-sleeved shirt and tie; for lady CAs, a dress or skirt is expected.

Then what? What do Classroom Assistants actually DO in the Dancing Classes classroom?

Typically CAs join in the circle and dance with the 5th graders - depending on your role/preference or the needs in the classroom. As a social dancer, I most often dance as a "follower" and assumed I'd be serving in that role as a volunteer CA. However it quickly became evident that due to changing numbers of "ladies and gentlemen" in the various 5th grade classrooms, they often needed extra "gentlemen" or ladies" (most social dancers call these roles "lead and follow"; Dancing Classrooms does not). I chose to learn both roles so I could help out as needed, but not every CA chooses to do that! Some CAs only dance the role they know, and may choose to sit out a dance if they don't know the patterns being taught. Some CAs assist with playing the music or help

in other supportive ways. Sometimes a 5th grade lady or gentleman needs extra help with learning a pattern, and you might be asked to help them. The CA role you choose is yours; talk with your "Teaching Artist" about what they need and what your preference is.

Okay- whew! So I'm not actually teaching the dances? Is that what the "Teaching Artist" does?

Each classroom has a "Teaching Artist" (TA) who has been trained in the specifics of the Dancing Classrooms curriculum. They are enthusiastic, organized, creative... and are THE TEACHERS!

Full disclosure: since my friends gently describe me as being "a tad bit controlling" (!) and because I've been a teacher, I knew it might be a challenge to not be the one "in charge" as a CA. My teaching experience was at the university level and over the years I'd selected a number of students to be teaching assistants...and I trained them for what I wanted them to do in their role, and what I did NOT want them to do. Before walking into my first Dancing Classrooms experience, I reflected on what I could learn from my best teaching assistants. The best assistants were the ones who "had my back" in class, they were supportive of what I was trying to do in class, they were willing to do whatever I needed in the moment, but they did not try to "teach" with me. As a CA in Dancing Classrooms, it's important to respect the specifics of how the TA is to teach the curriculum because each dance is introduced and taught in a creative and coherent way which "scaffolds" on previous lessons. For those of us who have taken LOTS of dance

classes and have LOTS of life experiences, although it is SO tempting to want to add a suggestion or two based on those experiences... resist the urge! Respect the TA and their training, listen and learn from them along with the students, and be supportive and willing to do whatever is needed!

-Or talk to me - I'd love to convince you to become a Classroom Assistant for Dancing Classrooms! (Email: leslie.koepke@gmail.com)

See you on the dance floor...and now go and "shake what your mama gave you!"

You've sold me on Dancing Classrooms! What do I do next to become a Classroom Assistant?

-Contact Andrea Mirenda, Co-President and Creative Officer of Heart of Dance at: 651.283.6799, or email her at andream@heartofdancemn.org.

-Or, talk to the ever-helpful Dede Ouren, Volunteer Coordinator of Dancing Classrooms at: dede.ouren@gmail.com.



Wellstone Group