

Youth Dancing Outreach

by Anna K. Herkamp, Heartland Board member

As the new year has begun, we at the Heartland Chapter of USA Dance have been reviewing our goals of what we'd like to see our chapter accomplish. We believe that among our chief duties as a ballroom advocacy organization is sharing our love of dance and its power to shape and change lives for the better.

To that end, the board has begun a discussion we'd like to continue about introducing dance to youth -- specifically, how to get more youngsters involved with this amazing activity.

Two of our board members, Bloomington resident Larry Gogel, who's been dancing since 1995 and 32-year veteran dancer and Brownsburg resident John Graves, have been involved with several after-school ballroom dance programs at various times during their dance careers.

They recently sat down with me to chat about their experiences -- what worked, what didn't, and their thoughts on getting some new programs going in the Indianapolis area.

Larry started working with grade school-age kids in 2005 after the release of the movie "Mad Hot Ballroom" was released. The film documents an inner-city program aimed at getting kids involved with dance.

Larry and some ballroom friends were inspired by the film and decided to get a program going at two elementary schools in Bloomington -- Grandview Elementary and Clear Creek Elementary schools.

They began by doing some dance demonstrations at school convocations that were such a hit, school officials invited them back. To gain support for the programs initially, the dancers reached out to teachers, who encouraged their students to participate. They also approached the school PTAs to explain what would be taught.

They organized the programs to meet once a week. They enlisted the help of Indiana University ballroom students who helped the kids learn basic steps. The programs lasted seven weeks and emphasized four dances -- waltz, foxtrot, swing and merengue. Kids had to be in the second through sixth grades to participate. The program drew about 20 to 25 kids per week.

At the end of the seven weeks, the kids and their instructors hosted an exhibition for the parents. The change over the course of the class was evident.

Some kids who seemed like they had a hard time paying attention during instruction ended up being some of the most dedicated. One such young man was such a good dancer, Larry was amazed.

Suddenly the kid who barely looked like he was paying any attention had impeccable posture and frame with his partner -- he was like a different person.

"It was interesting... If they'd been in a competition they would have won because they looked so good," Larry said.

John said he experienced the same thing with youth he'd worked with.

In the '90s, John became a youth outreach director with USA Dance. In the late '90s, the club was approached by a North Central High School senior who wanted to start a club. Heartland members did some exhibitions during a school lunch hour and ended up getting almost 40 kids who were interested -- a fairly even mix of girls and boys. John taught the students swing, cha-cha, rumba, waltz, fox trot and some tango. Each class met once a week for about an hour.

"There were a couple boys who got dragged to the classes by their girlfriends, but they thought this whole idea was going to be lame, so they were there to make fun of the club and disrupt class. But after the very first class these two boys were the first to approach me after the day's class was over and ask 'When are we going to do this again?'" he said.

John participated in similar programs at Seccina Memorial High School and Warren Central High School.

"Once we started the classes the kids were always enthusiastic. They were excited and couldn't wait until the next class," John said.

Larry said the experience of teaching dance to kids was rewarding, but continuing the program grew challenging as organizational issues began to surface. The Bloomington program lasted five years at one of the schools.

For one thing, the classes always needed parent volunteers or other adults to supervise the kids.

"I could teach them, but with kids, you have to have adult eyes on them because you turn your back and who knows what might happen," Larry said. "You don't necessarily need to know how to dance, but kids are going to be kids. They've got a lot of energy to release."

Larry added that having healthy snacks available after classes were over helped the kids settle down and have the energy to concentrate on the weekly lessons.

"Kids want to be challenged. It's not like being a football coach, but they do want a challenge and they do want some discipline and guidance," he said.

It was rewarding to be able to see the changes in many kids as they learned to dance. For some it even provided some much-needed stability in their home lives. Kids also benefitted from learning the history of the dances. The activity melds physical, mental and creative faculties into one great activity, Larry added.

"It's a good physical and cultural activity. You learn different types of music and it's a different type of interaction than sports. You meet different people and boys and girls can learn to be together too...they learn that the opposite sex isn't necessarily an alien creature," he said.

John said the programs' successes speak for themselves.

"I think the clubs I helped start and worked with were successful because they were fun! We did these before 'Dancing with the Stars' was on TV too so they weren't exposed to ballroom dancing and still the kids couldn't wait until the next class," he said.

"This one activity teaches team work, respect, cooperation, self-confidence, social skills just to list a few of the benefits ballroom dancing has for the kids."

We would like to hear your thoughts. As we continue this conversation, please let us know about any interest you or others have in reaching out to youth. Contact Larry at 317-759-0171 or e-mail lgogel@gmail.com. We are open to all thoughts and ideas, as well as potential pitfalls in organizing groups like these. We look forward to hearing from you!



Larry teaching youth class in Bloomington