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Students share the joy of dance at ballroom contest

By Michelle Martin

Staff Writer

The sun was still shining when the first group of students walked arm-in-arm onto the dance floor in the gym at Gordon Tech High School, 3633 N. California Ave., March 13. The ladies wore dresses and skirts, the gentlemen wore button-down shirts, some with ties. There were no jeans or athletic wear to be seen.

The dancers stood straight, smiled at their partners and began moving with the music, and another Catholic schools dance-off was under way. The event was the culminating evening for the four Catholic elementary schools that participate in Dancing with Class, a company that offers ballroom dance classes in Catholic and public schools alike.

Students from Holy Angels, Mount Carmel Academy, St. Ann and St. Matthias gathered that evening to put their twinkle toes to the test following 10 weeks of dance classes. Couples from each school competed in the merengue, tango and swing dances.



Ana Carpenter and Jack Wall from Mount Carmel Academy dance on March 13. Karen Callaway/Catholic New World

At St. Matthias, where the dance class was part of the school's International Baccalaureate arts program, students also created and performed a samba as an exhibition. Students from Mount Carmel Academy, which has been participating in dance classes the longest, performed a hip-hop dance. Flamenco dancers from host Gordon Tech also performed.

Margot Toppen of Dancing With Class went to Catholic schools in Ohio for 12 years and said that ballroom dancing is a good fit for Catholic schools and their emphasis on values.

"We really view the program as social skills development," Toppen said. "It's about having respect and courtesy and positive body language towards your partner, even if your partner is not someone you were friends with before."

More specifically, it also helps students learn how to interact with members of the opposite sex in a courteous manner.

"With fifth graders or middle schoolers, it's a universal truth that kids are going to be a little squirrely about touching each other," Toppen said.

While students at the dance-off were judged on their technical prowess, they were also scored on their presentation, which included the courtesy they showed to every dancer on the floor.

“Those are the skills that really make us happy and get us ahead in life,” Toppen said.

Toppen founded the program in 2006, taking the idea from a similar program in New York. She has found that the longer a school sticks with the program, the more successful it is. “In the beginning, there’s a little bit of a fear factor,” she said. “But then they see how much fun it is, and it becomes more popular.”

Shane Staszczuk, principal of Mount Carmel Academy, 720 W. Belmont Ave., can vouch for that. His school had the largest group at the dance-off, including his daughter, and the school took home the overall championship and the trophy for best technique.

“It’s just another way we can help them be well-rounded students,” Staszczuk said. “They learn manners, they learn to be part of a team. It’s really a great program for Catholic schools.”

One of the Mount Carmel Academy students who won individual recognition was fifth-grader Liam Brigden, who was in nearly every dance segment. He said his favorite part was when the actual competition was over and students were paired with partners from other schools to show that two people who don’t know each other can dance together if they both know the steps.

“It was really fun to dance with the other kids,” he said.

Of the three demonstration dances, Liam said, his favorite was the tango because the steps are so clearly defined. “It’s really easy to know what to do,” he said.

Yulissa Magana from St. Ann School, 2211 W. 18th Place, said her favorite dance to learn and perform was the merengue, even though the school was recognized for its success in the tango.

“It was a lot of movement, and I liked that,” she said.

Her mother, Maria Magana, was proud of the ribbon Yulissa won for the merengue, and said she was happy with the program.

“We signed her up because we wanted her to learn about other cultures,” she said. “It was a lot of fun.”

Holy Angels School, 750 E. 40th St., in its first year, was recognized for the merengue. Dancing With Class instructor Beverly Solazzo taught the Holy Angels students, and said she was very proud of how much they learned.

“This was their first experience, and they were very apprehensive at first,” Solazzo said. “But little by little, they let it out. Tonight they were asking questions about the competition and paying attention to the other dances.”

Holy Angels teacher Devin Jones said he was impressed with how attentive the students were to the competition.

“We’re an inner-city school in an African- American neighborhood,” Jones said. “We brought the program in to the school because we wanted to expose the students to other cultures that they don’t see in Bronzeville.”

Elizabeth McGovern and Alanna McKenna, both seventh-graders at St. Matthias, 4910 N. Claremont, said they hope to compete next year. Because dance was incorporated into the curriculum this year, only seventh- graders participated.

While they enjoyed working with the class to come up with moves for the samba they demonstrated, both girls said they liked the competition dances more.

“You got to know your partner better,” Alanna said.

“It was more one-on-one,” Elizabeth agreed.

St. Matthias took home awards for best presentation and for best swing dancing.

Additional photos:



Students from Mt. Carmel Academy cheer as their name is announced they won the big award for the evening as they competed in a "Dance-off" as part of the "Dancing with Class" program designed for youth on March 13. Karen Callaway/Catholic New World



Mariano Bonomo and Alanna McKenna from St. Mathias School and Autumn Bell and Christopher Bradford of Holy Angels school compete in the dance-off. Karen Callaway/Catholic New World



Emily Salinas and Bryan Franco from St. Ann Catholic School dance the swing at Gordon Tech High School on March 13. Karen Callaway/Catholic New World