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Pint-sized ballroom dancers learn courtesy and steps with local studio

by KELSEY SWANEKAMP

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The Chicago-based ballroom dance studio May I Have This Dance will be hosting a competition for an unlikely group of contestants on Thursday: elementary school students. The studio brings dance to pre-teens through its in-school curriculum, Dancing With Class, that teaches popular ballroom dances from the Waltz to the Samba. Education director Margot McGraw-Toppen talks about the challenges of teaching dance to children and adults and shares her thoughts on reality TV dance competitions.

What role does May I Have This Dance play in schools?

About five years ago we developed the curriculum, which is designed to be both a character education program as well as dance education. It's a great way to give kids a chance to practice things like being courteous to one another, shaking hands, saying thank you, and making eye contact. In the kids' minds, they're focused on learning the dances, and they don't even realize they're practicing these other things in the process.

Why does the studio work with schools?

We want to bring the dances to kids at an age where they might not be as intimidated and scared as a lot of adults are. A lot of adults say, 'I've got two left feet,' but kids don't think that about themselves. So if they've tried it and been successful with it in fifth grade, at least the seed has been planted.

For new dancers, whether adults or fifth graders, what's the hardest part of ballroom dance?

You're not only responsible for your own physical coordination, but you're syncing that up with a partner and adapting the way you naturally move to the way your partner naturally moves. For kids, the biggest barrier is a psychological one of 'Ew, cooties! I don't want to dance with a girl or a boy because I'm in fifth grade, and I'm not comfortable with that.'

Despite this early challenge, can anyone be a dancer?

Absolutely. To move to music is a human instinct. All babies move instinctively when they hear music, and I don't think that ever leaves anybody. Not everyone's cut out to be a professional dance performer, but everyone can enjoy dance.

Do people come in to the studio expecting to dance like a professional their first time on the floor?

You get every kind of student, but there's people who might get frustrated by realizing there's a lot of technique and fundamentals that you have to learn before you can get on to the more fancy types of things.

How long have you been dancing?

I started when I was about 5 years old. My training was in classical ballet and a little bit of jazz, and I didn't do any kind of partner or social dancing until my adulthood. My first social dance was swing and the Lindy Hop, and I got very hooked on that for a while.

As a dancer, what do you think of the reality TV dance competitions?

I don't love every aspect of the dance reality shows, but overall, they've put dance more into the mainstream. Ballroom dance is so much more familiar to people, so the thought of doing it doesn't seem so out of nowhere.

Do you watch them?

I've watched "So You Think You Can Dance," and I've watched most seasons of "Dancing With The Stars." I didn't see much of the recent season, but I'm glad Jennifer Grey won.

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