

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Growing by leaps and bounds

Dance workshops get kids moving



Kids learn to express themselves in a Community Leaps dance workshop.

By ANWAR ALI

An unconventional dance form is taking Toronto schools by storm as students learn to express themselves in new ways. They're learning to be confident—and they love it.

"It's kind of infectious. Once they're engaged, they do really great things," said Susan Lee, a dance instructor involved in the program.

Kaeja d'Dance (734 Euclid Ave.)—an innovative and award-winning dance company specializing in contemporary dance performance, choreography, and film—is giving students an alternative outlet for creative release. Last year, the company started Community Leaps, a three-year project designed to introduce dance at underprivileged schools. So far, it's garnered a positive response.

"It was really fun," said St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School (636 Glenholme Ave.) Grade 7 student Florencia Gil of the five-day lesson that she took part in this spring. "All the moves we did were our own ideas."

Toronto schools, with board funding and approval, invite Kaeja d'Dance to teach Express Dance via customized workshops that last anywhere from one class period to an entire week. Express Dance is a style through which participants combine a series of movements called "phrases" into an interpretive presentation.

"It's a form of dance for kids with little or no dance experience," Kaeja d'Dance co-artistic director Allen Kaeja said. "They're drawing from their own world."

Students have the freedom to develop their own modes of expres-

sion, a technique the Kaejas describe as "learner-centred."

"I don't go in and teach them the moves," Karen Kaeja, the other half of the Kaeja d'Dance partnership, said. "I go in and inspire them to create their own movements."

LEARNING



MATTERS

During the classes, students and instructors form a circle. When one instructor makes a movement, the class mimics it. A series of movements, sometimes accompanied with sound, become a phrase. The kids take charge of this "call and response" once they discover how it works.

"When I see them making that transition from barely moving to moving impulsively, it's very thrilling"
—Susan Lee, instructor, Kaeja d'Dance

"The combination of sound and movement gets their little engines going," said Lee, who has worked with the Kaejas for eight years.

By the end of the session, the students have created their own piece of theatre. The synergy of learning and

co-operation is the unseen force behind the workshop.

To encourage students who tend to react aver- sely to the idea of dancing, Allen said the choreographers use a "catch-them-off-guard" approach, whereby the word "dance" isn't even mentioned for the first half-hour.

Instructors begin with exercises to warm them up and ease them into behaving uninhibitedly.

As their apprehension dissipates, the exercises evolve into art.

"When I see them making that transition from barely moving to moving impulsively, it's very thrilling," Lee said.

St. Thomas Aquinas drama and dance teacher Carrie Schurig said "a lot of borders were crossed for them." Everyone gets into the spirit, even the shy kids, according to Allen. What's also impressed observers is that students who are considered troubled often emerge as leaders.

Kaeja d'Dance said they've taught nearly 130 workshops and estimated they reached 3,200 students in the first year of Community Leaps. Their goal is to reach 7,600 more. Aside from the student workshops, the project also offers subsidized tickets to Kaeja d'Dance matinee shows, teacher workshops, and film kits with performance videos and learning manuals.

The Kaejas toured across the province doing similar work in the past but in 2004, they turned their attention to Toronto. At the suggestion of the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Kaejas submitted a modestly-designed proposal. Trillium wanted it to be on a scale larger than Allen and Karen had imagined it, with the ambitious targets they hope to reach by next year.

"It was never a vision of ours to teach Express Dance to thousands of kids across the city," Allen said.

Yet it's a way for them to foster a legacy of sorts for Express Dance.

"There is a certain aspect of dance that is ephemeral," Karen said. "When I teach, it's another avenue which can seep into the pores of another individual. This is a physical experience."



It's time for action in Darfur

"Mr. Chair, we know that peace talks have failed seven times since August 2004. While all this talking is going on, people are dying in Sudan. People are being tortured by vicious warfare and women and girls are being raped. This cannot continue."

— Olivia Chow in the House of Commons

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People in Motion Show June 2-3, Queen Elizabeth Exhibit Hall
(For info www.people-in-motion.com)
Becel Heart and Stroke—Ride for Heart
June 4, Better Living Centre & Bandshell Park
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Rick Hansen Wheels in Motion June 11, Bandshell Park
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A hangover may be the least of your worries

Most people know that drinking too much alcohol can lead to some unwelcome symptoms the next day. But the trademark headache, upset stomach and fatigue you experience from a hangover may be the least of your concerns. According to the World Health Organization, alcohol is the third most harmful risk factor for chronic disease (WHO, 2003).


Research indicates that drinking more than 1 standard drink per day for women and 2 for men is associated with increased risks of high blood pressure, stroke and some types of cancer. As the amount of alcohol consumed increases, the risk of these conditions also increases. "We need to clear up misconceptions that people may have about alcohol and health," says your name, coordinator of your FOCUS site. "The bottom line is that for healthy people who choose to drink, reducing intake will help reduce the risk for chronic disease and other alcohol-related problems."

This month, FOCUS communities across Ontario are launching a province-wide campaign to raise awareness about alcohol and chronic disease, including the risk of stroke. Drinking more than 1-2 drinks per day and binge drinking (more than 5 drinks at one time) can double the risk of ischemic stroke and increase the risk of hemorrhagic stroke two-to three-fold. Alcohol use at these levels increases the risk of stroke by raising the blood pressure and contributing to obesity.

So if you don't drink, don't start. But if you choose to drink alcohol on occasion, the best advice is to limit your intake to no more than one to two standard drinks a day. The weekly limit for women is nine drinks; for men, it's 14. And remember, there are some situations where you should not drink at all (e.g., pregnancy, addiction, some chronic illnesses, driving).

The FOCUS Community Program is an initiative of the Ministry of Health Promotion and there are 22 FOCUS communities in the Province of Ontario. The overall goal of the program is to prevent problems, including injuries and chronic disease associated with alcohol and other drug use.

For more information on low-risk drinking
call the FOCUS Community
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