
NEWS

<FC>Dance classes bring youngsters together Cleveland, Arcadia youths tap to well-known tunes

BRIDGET BRADBURN

April 18, 2002, 12:01 a.m. ET

Every Wednesday afternoon, Laquita Williams spends her time after school learning how to do a kick-ball change and a shuffle step.

But her dance teacher says she learns more than that. She says the dance classes also teach confidence and self-esteem. Laquita is one of about 20 students at Cleveland Elementary School participating in an after-school dance program funded by a Stop the Violence grant. The program, and others like it, offers free dance lessons to students who could not otherwise afford it. "I wanted to join because I wanted to learn the dances. It was something new for me to do," 12-year-old Laquita said. "I just wanted to do something positive with my life." The class has been working on dance routines since October. The students learned the steps quickly and even practiced in their free time, said Terri Foster, a math teacher at Dawkins Middle School who teaches the dance class. "They're just really eager to learn. They enjoy learning the dance steps," she said. "They will come in and tell me, 'Hey, I practiced. Look at this.' They are so proud because they learned a new step." Last week, the dancers showed off their skills to their friends in the Boys and Girls Club at Cleveland. They wore leotards and dance shoes provided by the grant. The third- and fourth-graders performed a "Riverdance" style tap routine to Celtic music and a jazz dance. The fifth- and sixth-graders performed a jazz dance to "Celebrate" and a tap dance to "The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy." From their tapping toes to their beaming smiles on stage, their excitement was apparent. A few miles away at Arcadia Elementary School, Connie Farhan with Ballet Spartanburg spends

two hours every Friday morning teaching dance lessons to third-, fourth- and fifth-graders during their P.E. class. It is one of several outreach programs Ballet Spartanburg sponsors. "Our mission is to get to the more underprivileged children who don't have the opportunity to go to a performance or to take dance and learn self-expression," said Carlos Agudelo, artistic director for Ballet Spartanburg. Most of the students at Arcadia are economically disadvantaged. More than 75 percent receive free or reduced-price lunches. About a quarter of the students are Hispanic, and a quarter are African-American. Dance is a way to bring the students together, Agudelo said. The students choose partners, hold hands and synchronize their steps. "There's no barrier of race at that point," Agudelo said. Last week, the students learned the Texas two-step. They paraded around in a circle, stopping every few steps so the boys could turn their partners. Farhan also taught lessons in jazz, ballet, martial arts and lyrical dance. "We talked about some of the most historical lyrical songs, like 'Let It Be' and how they touch people, and how you can express the words through movement," Farhan said. For many of the students, the music and the cultural lessons are as new as the dance steps. Sheila Dogan, a community development specialist with Stop the Violence, said she wrote the grant to expose students to something besides hip-hop and rap music. "My mother likes it because she said she'd rather have me do tap than the other dances people do today," Laquita said. "She said it's too grown up for children to do." Farhan believes the dance lessons can make a difference in the classroom and in the students' lives. "If they accomplish one thing in class, they leave here more confident and they come back more confident," Farhan said. "(Dance) can provide health, happiness and general inner well-being."

Bridget Bradburn can be reached at 582-4511, Ext. 7269, or bridget.bradburn@shj.com.

