

Dancing for Victory Ridge Academy:

What Happens When a Professional Dance Company Performs For Special Needs Students?

By Susie R Spann

Nestled in Polk County, Florida is a charter school called Victory Ridge Academy. Students at Victory Ridge range from one year to twenty-two years of age and face challenges such as Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, and Autism Spectrum Disorder, as well as other disabilities. (wheelchair, odd poses, etc) Under the guidance of Debra Johnson, Director of Educational Leadership, Tammi Griswold, Classroom Teacher, Brian Denton, Physical Education Teacher, and many other dedicated staff members, Victory Ridge has developed a unique set of services that combine standard treatments with creative programs. (Staff) One of these programs, headed by Mr. Denton, combines art, music, and physical education to “touch the sensory needs” of the students. With this program as a building block, it seemed to be a natural progression to introduce dance to the curriculum. To do this, the Academy needed three things: the foundation begun in the PE program; familiarity with barriers when dealing with special needs students; and the method to introduce dance to the students, supplied by a professional dance company that had experience utilizing the healing power of dance for persons with similar disabilities.

The first challenge, a foundation for the idea to combine art, music, and physical education, has been met through the efforts of Brian Denton, who explains the PE program:

“The goal of our program is to develop and improve students’ balance, coordination, gross and fine motor skills, social skills, and overall health. We do this through physical activities that integrate art, music, and

cooperative learning. Each week there is a central theme or idea we work on such as health, citizenship, or responsibility. There is a PE lesson every day touching on these topics which is supplemented by alternating days of music and art activities. The music and art activities compliment the PE activities but they also serve as lessons in those subjects' foundational concepts as well. For example, lessons on basic movement concepts in PE also focused on tempo in music and visualizing movement in art.”

Mr. Denton is not alone in his efforts to reach students through new techniques, and he is quick to praise those who have helped him make this program a success.

“There is a lot of collaboration involved as well. We are lucky enough to have an amazing therapy department which offers such great ideas to meet the various needs of our students. Furthermore, our teachers and paraeducators have been very supportive and given me a lot of useful advice for working with their students. Everyone has been very encouraging and understanding of what we are trying to accomplish which has made this an incredible experience thus far. This is the first year [2018] we have tried such a program and we are still ironing out the wrinkles, but the response from staff, administrators, and parents has been awesome. Most importantly, the students are engaged, learning, and having fun!”

While the PE program has been successful, meeting the individual needs of so many students is an ongoing challenge. There are varying levels of academic progress as well as different levels of disabilities. Some students are “tattle tales.” Others are “runners.” Still others may require the use of specialized equipment for medical and therapeutic purposes. Regular classes work best with a ratio of one teacher for every three students in order to meet the needs of their students. These teachers have to be versed in working with a multitude of academic needs. They must also must be familiar with the types of

equipment in use. Due to these factors, children and young adults with special needs usually cannot assemble in a large group or for very long periods of time. Keeping a balance of knowledgeable staff on hand reduces the amount of flexibility to add new programs. Despite these challenges, Mrs Johnson and Ms Griswold continued to search for new ways to reach and to teach their young students.

A potential new way to reach students presented itself during a conversation between Ms Griswold and her long-time friend Debra Sutton. Ms Griswold remembered the initial impact in Ms Sutton's life when her (Ms Sutton's) mother fell prey to dementia, as well as the break in that fog of dementia when the mother watched her daughter dance. Ms Sutton described many other moments when dance exhibited healing powers over the debilitating illnesses that strike people as they get older. She had first-hand knowledge of these moments through her work as a dancer and co-founder of Care to Dance, Inc., a dance company based in Bartow, Florida.

Through her interactions with elderly clients who struggled with a variety of mental and physical impairments, Ms Sutton felt a need to reach out to them and share her own love of ballroom dance. Although the Care to Dance Company began by performing for their mostly elderly audiences, it quickly became evident that a large portion of the audience didn't want to simply sit and watch: They wanted to participate. Adults who had resided in a sleepy existence, disconnected from loved ones and from the world around them, began to wake up. Their eyes brightened when they saw the troop of dancers in glittering costumes enter the room. They focused on the themed routines, costumes, and decorations. They moved to the beat of the music. Some even rose from wheelchairs and danced with the professionals.

After witnessing the seemingly miraculous results in adults, Ms Sutton had the inspiration to learn if the same results could be achieved with a younger generation as well. The two friends connected, discussed their individual

inspirations, and made their plans. Knowing the potential mayhem that might ensue when introducing costumes and large movements into the safe, confined environment of the school, Ms Griswold and Ms Sutton decided to introduce the Care to Dance team to students at the Academy during the summer session, when they could keep groups to a range of 25 to 30 students. They chose a large room for the performance and students formed a wide circle surrounding the performers. Staff members, volunteers, and parents stood at the side, ready to intervene if necessary. The wide circle grew smaller with each performance as the children inched forward and began to participate. The dancers used a variety of costumes to match the style of dance, and performed routines with ‘pizzazz’ and showmanship that included high kicks and flamboyant movements. The program was a success, despite the concern that the stimulation might create a problem for children who were used to a more sedate environment.

“Not one student had to be escorted out of that room.” stated Ms Griswold. “They were just in awe. The costumes. The glitter.”

In fact, their eyes opened and “a little light bulb” shone in them. By the end of the session, all of the students were dancing.

“They didn’t want to stop,” Ms Griswold said, noting the differences in her young students.

The ‘tattle tale’ focused on the performances rather than on other students. The ‘runner’ sat still for once.

“They were normal kids,” Ms Sutton remembered.

The summer program was so successful that the school and dancers decided to stage a winter performance as well. In keeping with the tradition of the winter and holiday season, Mr. and Mrs. Claus made an appearance, complete with Santa’s red bag and a few magic tricks.

The children and youthful members of the audience watched in anticipation when Mr. and Mrs. Claus walked into the room, carrying a large red bag and promising a surprise from the North Pole. But, Santa said, the surprise would

not come until the end of the program. The audience at Victory Ridge Academy was as well behaved at this performance as they were at the summer program, waiting until the end for their surprise.

When the last note played and the final steps were danced, Santa and his dancing helpers bowed.

“Snowball fight!” Santa yelled, as rock music blared across the room.

Santa and crew turned to the circle of eager faces and began a barrage of fluffy white ‘snowballs.’ The first snowball bounced gently off of audience members, rolling back into the circle as a collective gasp nearly drowned out the lively music. More snowballs flew, and youngsters began catching the balls from their seats. In less time than it takes for a heart to beat three times, children and adults scrambled across the floor, laughing and giggling as they scooped up the white balls and tossed them in a centuries-old game.

The mother of a child in his 20’s summed it up.

“These children can have some normalcy.”

Normalcy. Safety. Fun.

That is what happens when dedicated professionals reach beyond traditional boundaries to connect with children who happen to have special needs.