

Something Special in the Studio

by Racquel Foran



Sara Zubrowski (right) performs on stage with her Dance London instructor at their year end recital.

Dancers are aware of what dance does for them. They know that in addition to being a great physical workout, it is also therapeutic. There is something cathartic in being lost in the rhythms and emotions of music. A good dance will leave you spent, but exhilarated; drained, but re-nourished. And for those who teach dance, they know that every day of every week amazing things come to life within the confines of the sprung floors and mirrored walls of the studios where they teach. Shy children become emboldened; quiet ones find their inner voices; hyper ones learn to harness their energy and use it positively; and confident ones become young leaders. The music along with the creativity of dance allows these young people to be all that they can be and, if only for a time, free to live their dreams. With all this it is easy then to understand why more and more parents are turning

to dance as a therapeutic choice for their special needs kids.

Gillian O'Connor was thrilled to finally find an activity her daughter Ruby looked forward to participating in. Ruby was living with an—until recently—undiagnosed developmental disability. Irlen Syndrome caused Ruby to struggle with balance and coordination; cognitively she struggled with reading and retaining information. Every year O'Connor would enrol Ruby in a new activity—swimming, ice skating, gymnastics—but nothing captured or inspired Ruby. As O'Connor explained, "Ruby needs to have some interaction with other kids to improve her social skills and I want her involved in some kind of activity – it's healthy for her."

Below: Emilee Ragan at the Invitation to Dance yearend show with her dance mentor Morgan Mason (top right).

It was an ad in her community newspaper that inspired O'Connor to give dance a try. *Invitation to Dance* was located minutes from her home in Calgary and they were advertising "mixed ability" classes. O'Connor gave the owner Erin Liffiton a call and was so impressed with the information she shared, O'Connor decided to register Ruby right away.

Invitation to Dance has been offering special needs dance classes since 2009. Carlee Reardon is in her fourth year at the University of Calgary studying Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies and she has been teaching the mixed ability class at *Invitation to Dance* for the last three years. But Reardon doesn't do it alone. The mixed ability students are paired with dance mentors—older student volunteers from the studio—who both inspire the special needs students and help them become stronger members of the studio community.

The classes focus on fun and maximizing participation. Reardon tries to explore a variety of dance styles including jazz, ballet, and tap. A typical class will include warm up, across the floor, centre exercises, combos and games. Imagery, props and colours are used to keep students engaged and exploring movement in new ways.

Liffiton says they see many changes in class over the course of a year, "We will often see students that are too shy to take part in a full class in September, will be one of our most exuberant dancers by the end of the year. Friendships develop and social skills mature. Often music can sooth a student who is anxious and eventually our most energetic dancers can find stillness for a



The special needs dance class from Dance London.



Ruby O'Connor in class with her instructor at Invitation to Dance in Calgary.

few moments in class. I see range of motion increase...memory and coordination also increases as the year progresses."

O'Connor says the experience has been nothing but positive for Ruby, "It has been very successful... it has helped her to see that you can still have fun even if you have challenges in life. Dance has helped her with her motor skills and has improved her balance and coordination. It has been less stress for me and positive for Ruby... she comes out smiling!"

Ruby agrees, "I like it. It's fun – especially the games."

Tammy Lechner is another mother who believes in the benefits of dance for all. Lechner along with her mother Ruth Anne Rogerson started offering special needs dance classes at their Ontario dance studio, *Dance London*, in 1999. Lechner explained, "We had a 6-year-old student with Down's Syndrome who had been in beginner ballet for three years. We wanted her to progress and have peers, so a class specific to her needs seemed the best way to teach at a different pace and allow friendships."

Over the years *Dance London* has taught kids with very diverse needs including those with Tourette's syndrome, radiation damage from chemotherapy,

brain injury and cerebral palsy. Lechner listed seizures, tantrums, lethargy, visual impairment, speech impairment, and defiance among some of the challenges faced in the special needs class. Much like *Invitation to Dance* in Calgary, *Dance London* paired special needs students with volunteer high school students trained to deal with the students' specific needs and challenges. (Lechner also noted the importance of a skilled teacher to meet the needs of each student; having temporarily lost theirs to maternity leave, *Dance London* unfortunately is not offering special needs classes this year.)

Lechner's own daughter is autistic and she started taking dance at *Dance London* when she was nine, "she loves music and we wanted exercise and socialization [for her]," explained Lechner.

A personal highlight for both grandma Rogerson and Lechner was seeing her own special needs daughter dance onstage with the assistance of her younger sister.

When Lechner and her husband decided to move to Victoria, BC with their four children in 2009, it was important for Lechner to find another special needs dance class for her daughter; she is currently enrolled at a religious dance school that offers a program similar to the one in Ontario. "It is nice to see her with her peers enjoying music and movement," Lechner said.

Many dance studios do offer special needs classes, but they can sometimes be difficult to find because they are not always consistently available from year to year. A minimum number of students are needed in order for a studio to be able to offer a class—sometimes this minimum is hard to meet so classes are cancelled. And finding and keeping qualified teachers can also be a challenge. But for parents, students and teachers who are lucky enough to be involved with one of these classes the rewards are worth the effort.

Liffiton recalled one favourite memory, "One year we had a student who would not jump for the majority of the year. We tried so many images and songs and demonstrations to encourage her. I will never forget the excitement on her face the day she finally held my hands and jumped up and down, over and over.... The little things are the most rewarding."

At just dance! we are sure that feeling of excitement is something dancers of all ages and abilities can relate to and it is part of the reason we all dance. 🌟



Dancer Hoen Zhu works with her dance mentor Sophia Gardner (right).



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