

Canstar Community News - ONLINE EDITION

Not your average dance class

Local dance teacher bringing dance to kids with disabilities

By: Dani Finch

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Dance classes help 13-year-old Shelby Evans with her posture and gait.

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Jacqui Davidson is hoping to provide all children with an opportunity to dance.

That's why she's started Dance-Ability, a new dance program designed for youth living with a disability, including those who use wheelchairs, walkers or canes.

Davidson, who has 20 years of teaching experience in the Winnipeg dance community and is a long-standing faculty member of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School, developed a similar program for adults living with a disability called ExplorAbility four years ago.

Now, she's adapted the concept for youth and is bringing it to classes to Central Corydon Community Centre's Crescentwood site, and Sturgeon Heights Community Centre.

"For any child participating in dance, it's a form of physical expression. We all connect to music in some way, it's part of our culture. I think that every child deserves to have that opportunity — and that's why I do it," Davidson said.

The St. James resident said the Dance-Ability classes are based on creative movement and explore the basic movements of dance including ballet and basic jazz.

"We have this picture that dance needs to be super structured — especially when you see a ballet or jazz class. I had to change my teaching approach a little bit and allow people to do what they can within their ability," Davidson said. "That's everything from how long they can focus, to how they pick up or do a movement."

While she likes to keep things loose and let students explore movement in their own way, Davidson's classes are still disciplined and incorporate more structured elements, too.

Davidson said Dance-Ability has a strong focus on alignment and posture, which is important for many living with disability.

Colleen Evans said this is exactly why she put her 13-year-old daughter, Shelby, who has Down Syndrome, into dance in the first place.

"Our pediatrician (recommended) we put her in ballet — it helps with her posture and gait," she said.

But, Evans said it was difficult to find a class that Shelby really benefited from – whether she was being treated differently than the other students, or not being able to grasp the basic movements the other children could.

"There's not a lot of kids with disabilities that take dance, and I think a lot of the reason is that they feel the cold shoulder — a lot of (dance) studios aren't thrilled about having a student with disabilities. There's really no special needs dance classes other than this Dance-Ability," she said.

Evans, who had Shelby in classes with Davidson at the Royal Winnipeg Ballet School, was thrilled when Davidson told her she was starting program especially designed for youth living with disability. She's signed her daughter up for the inaugural session as well recommended the class to other families through the Manitoba Down Syndrome Society.

"I think it's going to be a completely different perspective and slow down a bit so Shelby can learn some of the very basic skills that take her a lot longer to (learn)," she said.

Registration for the Dance-Ability program closes on Sept. 29. For more information or to register, visit accessdanceforlife.com.

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