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WEDNESDAY, August 10, 2011

Chester County's Leading Information

Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp



Staff photos by Amy Dragoo

Above, Mollie Holman participates in the fifth annual Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp for children with physical challenges Tuesday at the Diane Matthews School of Dance Arts in West Chester.



At right, Kate Santangelo and coach Rachel Zajac work on their moves during the free camp, which is designed for children with developmental challenges in conjunction with the memorial fund for Zajac's sister, Samantha.



Sina Petraghini and her coach Angelina Reiher, pictured left, and Mollie Holman, pictured above, participate in the Less Involved class.

PEOPLE



DAILY LOCAL NEWS

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Dancing for joy

Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp brings together kids with physical challenges who share a love of music and dance

By CHRISTINA MELE
Journal Register News Service

The Samantha Zajac Memorial Fund held its fifth annual Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp last week for children with physical challenges.

This year, 15 boys and girls with physical impairments participated in the free, four-day camp, marking the largest turnout to date.

"We use typical dance curriculum," camp founder Carla Zajac said. "There is a warm-up, choreography and a cool-down. The children are separated into three groups by ability."

Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp is designed for children who are interested in dance, but have physical disabilities that prevent them from participating in a typical dance camp.

Dancers this year ranged in age from 6 to 13. To accommodate their disabilities, many dancers use wheelchairs, walkers, canes, braces or gait trainers. The children's diagnoses range from cerebral palsy to spina bifida to developmental delays to other impairments.

The one thing they have in common?

A love and joy for dance and music.

"Here they can be a part of a team, and feel very good about themselves," Zajac said. "The children have blossomed and become more comfortable."

The camp was founded in memory of Carla's daughter, Samantha "Sammy" Zajac. Sammy, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy as a baby, had a love and passion for dance.

"She was the happiest, most playful, most creative little



Staff photos by Amy Drago
Madison Boggs enthusiastically dances in the Most Involved class at Diane Matthews Dance Studio, which is hosting the Shining Stars Dance Camp for kids with physical challenges.

girl," Zajac said. "She loved her friends and family. She worked really hard to overcome her challenges, and that was inspirational to all of us."

In 2001, Sammy died suddenly from a severe blood infection when she was 8 years old. In memory of Sammy, her family established the Sa-

mantha Lee Zajac Memorial Fund through the Chester County Community Foundation. The fund's mission is to aid children with disabilities. The Zajac family used the fund to create and support the adapted dance camp.

"It's a lot of fun and it's so rewarding," Zajac said. She, her husband, Denny, and

their two daughters all participate in the camp each year.

Monica Lepore, professor and coordinator of adapted physical education at the West Chester University Department of Kinesiology, is the program adviser at the camp, and used to teach Sammy.

"What I've seen these children do is become part of a group," Lepore said. "Seeing them be part of a group session where everyone is accepted, it's just normalized. That's what I think they get out of it. This is where they come, and no one will make fun of them."

Four instructors and 16 volunteer coaches worked with the 15 dancers, occupying all three studios at the Diane Matthews School of Dance Arts in West Chester. The dancers learn to adapt dance moves to maximize their individual abilities.

Volunteer coach Laura Meier is an adapted physical education major at West Chester University.

"Nine times out of 10, these kids aren't offered this kind of experience," she said. "They're not offered the opportunity to play sports or engage in physical activity, so the volunteering is what makes a difference."

Campers spend the first three days learning choreographed dances, and on the fourth day they perform the dances they've learned for their families.

The instructors this year were Diane Matthews, director of the Diane Matthews School of Dance Arts; Gretchen Studlien-Webb, associate professor and dance program coordinator at the West Chester University Department of Theatre and Dance; Carolyn Giles, physical therapy assistant at A.I. duPont Hospital for Children in Delaware; and Lepore.

"I call them my 'dream team'," Zajac said. "They

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serve as such great role models."

Zajac is especially appreciative of Lepore, who brings positive energy to the camp and has been with the Zajacs since day one.

"We could not be doing this dance program without her and her family," Zajac said. "She provides tremendous expertise, facilitates growth, and continually educates our dancers and volunteers."

Studien-Webb called the camp a "transforming experience" for the dancers.

"It's challenging as an instructor," Matthews added. "But dance is a wonderful creative outlet. When kids with special needs get to experience what everyone else does, it's a wonderful thing." Matthews has participated for the last four years, hosting and instructing the children for free.

Giles said that, as an instructor, it is her responsibility to come up with the choreography and then adapt it to what the children are able to do.

"It's really great for them to be able to move in an environment that they're not typically able to be exposed to," she said. "It's a great opportunity for them to have this experience with kids that have other disabilities as well."

Another key aspect to the team is the volunteer coaches.

"By the end of day one, the coaches are very hands-on," Zajac said. "We couldn't do it without our coaches. They are as instrumental as our instructors."

Two of the volunteer coaches are Sammy's sisters, Lindsay, 19, and Rachel, 14, who have worked at the camp for the past three years.

Lindsay said this is her third year working with Mallie Holman, a 9-year-old girl with brittle bone disorder. Through the years, she has seen Mallie and other campers become more confident in themselves, and more social.

"This is an outlet for them that they wouldn't have access to otherwise," she said. "It's really nice to see them grow as individuals."

Lindsay also said it's very special to her to be able to help children like her sister, Sammy.

"I've seen other children at this camp that remind me of my sister, that are so passionate and friendly, and might not otherwise have had this opportunity," she said. "It's so special. It's her legacy, she's living on."

Mallie is a fifth-year camper at Shining Stars with a passion for dance.

"I like coming because it's easy to express myself," she said. "I've learned not to be shy with my moves."

Mallie's mother, Leigh Holman, said Mallie has had more than 35 fractures and four surgeries in her nine years of life. Mallie looks forward to camp so much that the family plans its vacations around it each year.

"What's nice about this camp is it allows her to see that there are other people who deal with other things similarly or not similarly to her, but that she's not alone," she said. "The Zajacs really make a difference in our life. We're blessed to know them."

Each dancer is paired with a personal coach. The camp's anthem is Earth, Wind & Fire's "Shining Star," and Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday each have the theme of earth, wind and fire, respectively.

Eleven-year-old Jaelyn Wingard has cerebral palsy, and she enjoys coming to camp to learn the dances. "I get to dance here, and I can't dance in most places," she said.

"What I've learned deep down is how cherished each person is on this Earth, and that children with disabilities shouldn't have to prove themselves, that they can do something to feel worth," Lepore said. "They are worthy just being."

The Chester County Community Foundation is located in downtown West Chester. It encourages people to contribute to lasting philanthropic legacies, and holds more than \$30 million in trust. The foundation awards \$2 million in grants and scholarships each year.

Donations can be made to the fund online at www.chescocf.org using Visa or MasterCard, or via a check to the Chester County Community Foundation, made payable to the Samantha Lee Zajac Memorial Fund.