Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp

Above, Mallie Holmen 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 Petragnini and her coach Angelina Reher, pictured left, and Mallie Holman, pictured above, participate in the Less Involved class.
Dancing for joy

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 spinal 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 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 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 Samantha Lee Zajac Memorial Fund through the Chester County Community Foundation. The fund's mission is to provide children with disabilities with the adapted dance camp.

"It's a lot of fun and it's so rewarding," Zajac said. "We love it."

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

"Nine times out of 10, they're not 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 Studenik-Webb, associate professor and dance program coordinator at West Chester University Department of Theatre and Dance; Carolyn Gilgan, physical therapist assistant at A.J. duPont Hospital for Children in Delaware; and Lepore.

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

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serve as such great role
models.*

Zajac is especially ap-
preciative of Lepore,
who brings positive en-
ergy to the camp and
has been with the Zajacs
since day one.

“We could not be
doing this dance pro-
gram without her and
her family,” Zajac said.

“She provides tremen-
dous expertise, facili-
tates growth, and con-
tinually educates our
dancers and volun-
teers.”

StuddlenWebb called
the camp a “transform-
ing experience” for the
dancers.

“It’s challenging as an
instructor,” Matthews
added. “But dance is a
wonderful creative out-
let. When kids with spe-
cial needs get to expe-
rience what everyone
else does, it’s a wonder-
ful 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 re-
sponsibility 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 op-
pportunity for them to
have this experience
with kids that have
other disabilities as
well.”

Another key aspect to
the team is the volun-
teer 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 instrumen-
tal as our instructors.”

Two of the volunteer
coaches are Sammy’s
sisters, Lindsay, 13, 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 5-
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 other-
wise,” 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 chil-
dren 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 my-
self,” she said. “I’ve
learned not to be shy
with my moves.”

Mallie’s brother, Leigh
Holman, said Mallie has
had more than 25 frac-
tures and four surgeries
in her nine years of life.
Mallie looks forward to
camp so much that the
family plans its vaca-
tions 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 simi-
larly or not similarly to
her, but that she’s not
alone,” she said. “The
Zajacs really make a dif-
ference in our life.
We’re blessed to know
them.”

Each dancer is paired
with a personal coach.
The camp’s author is
Earth, Wind & Fire’s
“Shining Star,” and Mon-
day, Tuesday and Wed-
nesday each have the
tHEME of Earth, Wind
and Fire, respectively.

Eleven-year-old Jaslyn
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 cher-
ished each person is on
this Earth, and that chil-
dren with disabilities
shouldn’t have to prove
themselves, that they
can do something to feel
worth,” Lepore said.

“They are worthy just
being.”

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Community Foundation
is located in downtown
West Chester. It encour-
ges people to contrib-
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