

Philadelphia Inquirer  
Posted on Thu, Aug. 2, 2007



LAURENCE KESTERSON / Inquirer Staff Photographer

**Their time to make some moves: "We want to empower them," a professor said a camp for girls with physical disabilities.**

By Will Hobson  
For The Inquirer

At Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp at West Chester University, student and dance coach Tina Neubert dances with 6-year-old Kate Santangelo.

"Mallie, can I see your ballet?" asked Chantelle Chaudoin, a 19-year-old physical education major at West Chester University.

Mallie Holman, a 5-year-old dressed in a black tutu and matching dance slippers with contrasting white stockings, nodded and smiled.

Seated in a black wheelchair with purple piping, Mallie was deft in revving the wheels, and she circled the dance floor once before raising her arms in the air and curving her hands like Baryshnikov.

Mallie was one of five young girls to take part in the Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp, a pilot program designed for children ages 5 to 12 with physical disabilities. The camp, held at West Chester's Sturzebecker Health Sciences Center from July 23 to 27, gave the girls an opportunity to make some moves on the dance floor while giving undergraduate students valuable experience in adapted physical education.

The camp was free to all participants and was funded by the Samantha Zajac Memorial Fund, which was created in memory of a former Westtown-Thornbury Elementary School student, born with cerebral palsy and without a spleen, who died in 2001 at age 8 from a blood infection.

Carla Zajac, Samantha's mother, came up with the idea for the camp late last summer when her brother sent her a newspaper article about an adapted dance program.

"It's a regular dance program. If you walked in and didn't see the wheelchairs, you would think a regular dance class was going on," said Monica Lepore, professor and coordinator of adapted physical education at West Chester. Adapted physical education, Lepore said, focuses on adapting regular classes so that physically disabled students can take part.

Mallie's ballet routine, wheeling around in circles where other students would run in circles, is an example of an adaptation.

"We want to empower them," Lepore said of the girls at the camp, "so when they're teenagers, they can make the adaptations themselves."

Gretchen Studlien-Webb, coordinator of the dance minor program at West Chester, ran the class while Lepore looked on, helping with adaptations.

Each girl in Shining Stars also benefited from the attention of two special helpers, West Chester undergraduates completing a summer course for their physical education major.

"I think they made it really special for each of the dancers, because they felt like they got a lot of attention," Studlien-Webb said. "That was wonderful; it made the class able to progress a lot faster than if it was just the children."

The dancers wrapped up their 90-minute class around noon with their finale, a multi-step dance set to Earth, Wind, and Fire's "Shining Star."

The four girls, lined up in the middle of the dance floor, faced their helpers and Studlien-Webb, who reminded them of each new move - "climbing the ladder," followed by a hand-roll, and finishing up with a '60s dance move, "the scuba," where one hand pinches the nose while the other is waved above the head.

As the students filed out, one of the mothers shook Zajac's hand and said, "I really hope you guys do this next year."

"All you needed to do was see the looks on those little girls' faces to know that it was a worthwhile experience," said Zajac, who will soon be in discussions with Studlien-Webb and Lepore about next year's camp.

For more information about possible future Shining Stars Adapted Dance Programs, or the Samantha Lee Zajac Memorial Fund, visit [chescofc.org](http://chescofc.org), call 610-399-3066, or e-mail [ShiningStarsADC@aol.com](mailto:ShiningStarsADC@aol.com).

