



Dance Instructor Gretchen Studlien-Webb stands behind dancer Kate Santangelo at the Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp. Staff photo by Larry McDevitt

Children Learn to Dance like the Stars

By Sara Lynn Kennedy, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp, a camp for children with mobility limitations, was held at West Chester University this week, in memory of Samantha Zajac.

Zajac died in 2001 at age 8 due to a severe blood infection. The Samantha Zajac Memorial Fund of the Chester County Community Foundation teamed up with the school to hold the adapted dance camp free of charge for children with disabilities between the ages of 5 and 12.

Sammy, who had a mild case of cerebral palsy, loved dancing, said her mother, Carla Zajac of Westtown. Her family wanted to give children with disabilities in the community an opportunity to experience, enjoy and benefit from dance like Sammy did.

“Sammy loved creative movement and responded to music. She had great rhythm,” said Zajac. “Music was a very big part of her life.”

Sammy excelled and received satisfaction from dancing and the Zajac family hoped that other children, with limitations in how they can dance, would benefit and enjoy dancing as much as Sammy did.

“She would dance on our cocktail table to Van Morrison, Zajac said. “Dancing was another channel for her uniqueness.”

The family approached Monica Lepore, a professor at the university, who teaches the adaptive physical education classes that Sammy participated in, with their idea of starting a camp. This camp, which got under way this week for its inaugural session, is the first of its kind to be held in this area.

Zajac said the goal of this camp is for every child to benefit. Children with physical disabilities sometimes have trouble being “mainstreamed” into regular dance classes. A program like this takes the children out of that environment. They can feel capable and confident in a setting where they feel comfortable.

“We did this so that other children, with more significant disabilities, could also love dance the way Sammy did,” Zajac said.

Lepore said she loves her job because she gets to see the hearts of her students.

“I get to see students in a different light. They have to get goofy and bring themselves down to the kid’s level,” she said.

Four girls, between the ages of 5 and 10, attended this week’s camp.

The class aimed to adapt to the needs of each child. Many of the dance moves used arm and hand expressions focusing on upper body strength. Each child was given lots of individual attention by a team of WCU students as well as professors.

On Wednesday, as a visitor watched, the girls danced with streamers to songs like “Under the Sea,” from Disney’s “The Little Mermaid” and “Shining Star,” by Earth, Wind and Fire. Dressed up in their dancing gear, they seemed to let go of their physical obstacles with each new dance move.

The children danced to fast and slow music, sat on mats and did exercises, used instruments and played freeze frame dancing games. They broke out of their shells and showed confidence in their dancing. The children connected with their teachers and each other in the camp. The room was filled with laughter; the

students let their personalities and senses of humor pour out into their dance moves.

The students teaching and dancing with the children were part of an adapted physical education course at WCU. All physical education majors and adaptive physical education minors must take this course, which shows future teachers how to properly care for students with disabilities in physical education classes.

“This is a great learning experience for the West Chester students, they can now include dance in their physical education. Hand’s on is the best way to learn,” said Ann Hughes, the adapted physical education professor working with the children.

“It’s a win-win situation,” said Zajac. “The children need help and the students need the learning experience.”



Mallie Holman does a circle in her wheelchair as part of a dance routine during the Shining Stars Adapted Dance Camp. Staff photo by Larry McDevitt