

dance

FOR ALL

The Music and Motion program at Maryland Youth Ballet in Silver Spring gives students with physical handicaps the opportunity to experience the joy—and freedom—of dance

By Virginia Myers



ERICK GIBSON

Jennifer Cox and Mary Cassell

It is a weekday afternoon at Maryland Youth Ballet in Silver Spring. Clusters of young girls dressed in pink and lavender tights and leotards stretch before class, claiming swaths of the carpeted hallway with endlessly long legs and willowy arms, stretching with a suppleness that makes the girls seem fluid, boneless.

There is a different scene down the hall in Studio D. Here, the smiles are as big but the muscles are rigid, joints stiff. Students enter the studio with leg braces and canes, even wheelchairs. Studio D is home to Music and Motion, a dance program for children with physical disabilities.

Class begins much as any other beginning ballet class would: Teacher Jennifer Cox leads the children, ages 4 through 14, through basic movement, using the vocabulary of ballet dancers all over the world. First position. Plié. “Where’s your ballet stance?” she’ll ask, and the children will straighten as far as they’re able, pulling up and standing tall. “Excellent, that is really good,” she’ll praise in her New Zealand accent. The children, eager to please, will point their toes or practice jumping over ballet slippers placed at intervals on the floor; they’ll sit, straddle-legged, and stretch arms over heads, and Cox, “in her 60s,” will move around the room adjusting a hand here, an arm there.

Some of the young girls from the conventional classes help out, whispering “good job” and placing reluctant limbs in their proper positions.

In one class, where students are more restricted in their movement—most have cerebral palsy—the children climb into canvas harnesses hung from straps that extend from the ceiling. Securely fastened, they are suspended at floor height, relieved of weight-bearing but upright and able to move their limbs—able to dance. It is clear, watching the deep concentration on their faces, that this can be hard work. But it is also liberating, and eyes light up when the movement takes hold.

The idea for the Music and Motion program began with Mary Cassell, Jennifer Cox’s 9-year-old granddaughter, who has cerebral palsy. Though the condition restricts Mary to labored movement requiring intense concentration just to walk and talk at the same time, Cox wanted to share a lifelong love of dance with Mary. “Seeing that we came from a ballet family, I wanted to make sure that she had the opportunity to be able to feel the movement of dance,” says Cox, who designed Music and Motion for Mary and children like her.

To say that hers is a “ballet family” is an understatement. Cox grew up dancing in her native New Zealand, and was a soloist in Ballet Petite, a semiprofessional ballet company in Christchurch. She became a flight attendant for Air New Zealand, then New Zealand National Airline, and met her husband-to-be on a plane; when he asked her to dinner she wound up taking him to the ballet instead.

After the two married and moved to Potomac in 1967 (he was American, and had been visiting New Zealand while stationed with the Navy in Antarctica), Cox began working with the Maryland School of Ballet—the predecessor of Maryland Youth Ballet—on St. Elmo Avenue in Bethesda. She helped found MYB in the 1970s, and enrolled her two daughters in ballet classes there. One of them, Julie Kent, is now recognized worldwide as a prima

ERICK GIBSON



Like an apprentice ballerina, Mary Cassell (left) dances beneath the gaze of more experienced “principals” like her grandmother, Jennifer Cox, who created the Music and Motion program for Mary and other disabled children.

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COURTESY JENNIFER COX

The ballerina family and company in Studio D at Maryland Youth Ballet (back row, from left): Jennifer Cox, Julie Kent Barbee, MYB founder Hortensia Fonseca and Susan Cassell; (middle row, from left) Cox's granddaughters, Elizabeth, Mary and Catherine Cassell; (front row, from left) Cox's grandsons, William Barbee and James Cassell

ballerina. When Julie graduated from MYB, she went to the School of American Ballet in New York, was invited to apprentice at the associated American Ballet Theatre, then moved through the ranks of corps de ballet, soloist and, in 1993, principal dancer. She has won prestigious international ballet awards and starred in the movie *Center Stage*.

Cox's older daughter, Susan Cassell, also danced at MYB, but left during high school when she decided against a career in dance. Susan got a degree in electrical engineering, worked for 10 years designing software and now lives in Darnestown as a busy stay-at-home mom raising four children. One of them is Mary.

Working with Mary's therapist, Rebec-

ca Leonard, Cox first developed assisted ballet classes for her granddaughter and four other children, two of whom had siblings in the conventional MYB classes. Classes grew and later, when an anonymous donor granted the school \$25,000, Leonard developed the system of harnesses. "We always thought it would be great fun for those children who need a device, be it a walker or canes, to be able to get into a body-suspension weight-bearing system," says Leonard, who lives in Potomac and has a pediatric physical therapy practice in Rockville. The spring-equipped harnesses, suspended from the ceiling, "opened up possibilities for moving about in the space—turns, backwards stepping and sideward stepping," even spinning motion. For many students, orthotics come off when the harnesses go on. "Therapeutically, it has given them great opportunities," says Leonard, who has lectured at professional conferences on its use. "Then we've tried to bring that together with teaching ballet."

The program goes far beyond traditional physical therapy, with its one-on-one interaction and one-motion-at-a-time approach, says Susan Cassell. "In the ballet class, you're doing a whole bunch of things," she says. "You're listening to the music, you're counting, you take three steps forward and two steps back, or up two and then to the side two. It's a lot more complicated than just the physical therapy. I think it's a lot more fun." Socially and psychologically, just saying they are going to ballet class, complete with leotard and tights, is a thrill for children who struggle to fit in with their peers.

"Even though they don't have the same free body movements that kids who usually take dance class have, they really teach them about moving the way dancers move, the way dancers think about moving, which is really important for kids who have motion problems," says Ted Boucher of Gaithersburg, whose 12-year-old daughter, Rosemary, enrolled last year. "I think that it helped her a lot," he adds, noting that Rosemary's therapist was "really impressed" at how her movement had improved.

Live music adds a magical element that helps move the children in ways a therapist could never accomplish. "Can you

COURTESY ART/PHOTO BY ROSALIE O'CONNOR



“The **impact of the experience** is not only clearly evident on the students, but also on all of those involved in the program, from the young dancer volunteer helpers, to the parents and the teachers.”

—**Julie Kent**

try to do some galloping music?” Cox will ask pianist Arshak Sirunyan, and off he’ll go with an improvised composition, accenting beats to guide the movement. Leonard calls Sirunyan phenomenal. “Sometimes we just turn it over to him and the children have to move to different rhythms.”

“How often can you get a live pianist to play for your child?” marvels Karen Isaac

of Bethesda, whose 14-year-old daughter, Seychelle, is in her second year of classes.

It is not a perfect system: harness straps under the arms and the sling under the crotch can chafe. Isaac says the harness does little to correct her child’s tendency to pitch forward. Nevertheless, the classes have been a positive experience for Seychelle. “She really enjoys being there,” says Isaac, who describes Cox as

“very kind and very patient. Anybody who dedicates their time to these kids is wonderful in my book.”

Others agree. “She’s a very dedicated teacher,” says Michelle Zimmerman, an adult student who volunteers to assist the children. Zimmerman, 70, lives in Silver Spring and regularly takes MYB’s adult stretch class. Her daughter, now 35, began traditional ballet classes with Cox at age 5.

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"When you see those smiles on those children, it's just heartbreaking in that sense that it's so rewarding," Zimmerman says. "You feel so good about giving them that opportunity to feel so happy about themselves, achieving something."

Cox, who built up the introductory division classes at MYB in its early days, continues to teach some 150 children in nine classes a week, including Music and Motion. A jolly-looking woman who seems always to be in motion, her style is "lovingly strict," says daughter Susan. Cox calls dance "one of the joys of my life," and speaks of the specialized class she teaches with no small degree of awe, recognizing the importance of Leonard's skill and training as a physical therapist ("I just teach the class," she says), and the essential support of MYB's staff, students and parents.

"The parents are universally thrilled to see the joy that their child experiences when moving with the music and enjoying the interaction with everyone in the classroom," she says, adding, in a more

candid moment, "It really is quite beautiful. I just see so much love."

MYB has been supportive of Music and Motion from day one. Indeed, it is an extension of the family ethic the studio encourages. The studio, founded by Hortensia Fonseca, who at age 86 still teaches, has mentored generations of dancers who have forged close friendships; their fondness for their alma mater is obvious in their letters home, posted on studio bulletin boards beside audition notices and newspaper reviews with alumni photos and names noted with arrows and exclamation marks.

Music and Motion began in 2004 after a conversation Cox had with one of the ballet parents, whose older son has cerebral palsy; the parent recommended Leonard as a therapist for Cox's granddaughter, then a toddler. When it turned out that Leonard's three daughters all grew up dancing, and that her oldest worked at ABT—where Cox's daughter Julie Kent is a principal dancer—it seemed natural

that the two women would team up to create a program for Mary and others with limited mobility. Music and Motion began with Cox; Leonard, the pianist; Mary; and four students, two of whom had siblings in mainstream MYB classes. The harnesses were first set up in 2007, when the new studio opened.

This year, there are two Music and Motion classes that serve up to 16 children ages 4 to 14—one for children who can stand unassisted, and another for those who use the harnesses. Bethesda's Jessica Lassiter, 28, an alumnus of MYB's most advanced classes, returned this fall with a doctorate in physical therapy to help teach. Many students from conventional classes—both children and adults—volunteer to help, so parents get a break from the facilitating that usually falls to them during physical therapy sessions and other after-school activities. "It allows parents to relax, talk to each other, catch up," says Ita Berkow of Bethesda, whose daughter, Lily, 8, has enjoyed making

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friends among other girls with physical handicaps.

Even parents of children in the conventional dance programs pitch in to host the reception that follows the annual performance/demonstration at the end of the session. "Everyone there treats and thinks of the kids in that class as part of the ballet school, part of their community," says Boucher. "They think of them as dancers, too."

"It's become a family affair, really," says Cox.

That family flavor is an extension of Cox's own family. The mother of five—two daughters and a son of her own and two sons from her late husband's previous marriage—she frequently visits with daughter Susan, her husband and four children in Darnestown. And she sometimes tours with daughter Julie and Julie's husband, Victor Barbee, ABT's associate artistic director, looking after their 4-year-old son, William. Susan and Julie joined Cox with their families this sum-

mer for a week in Duck, N.C.

Dance is woven inextricably into the family's life; Cassell holds two season ballet tickets at the Kennedy Center, allowing her children to take turns attending the ballet with her, and Cox has watched Kent perform on stages from New York's Met Opera to La Scala, in Milan. "For our family, dance is an important part of our daily life," Cox says.

But Cox is the first to recognize that the "dream of a lifetime" her daughter Julie has achieved as a prima ballerina is not the only charm ballet has to offer. "Ballet is an art form, and for many people art has been considered a luxury," she says. But with increased recognition of its value as an educational tool, it is more and more an accepted part of American life. "Just look at all the artistic endeavors funded by public and private sources because of the belief that as human beings artistic expression is an integral part of our nature," says Cox. Ballet in particular teaches hard work,

goal-setting, discipline and time management and, says Cox, "It gives them the confidence in life that they need." This goes for able-bodied students as well as disabled.

At the end of each year, Music and Motion hosts a demonstration performance for families and friends. "When these children perform, the satisfaction and joy by everyone involved is no less than what you will witness at the Kennedy Center," Cox says.

"The joy of dance is for everyone. . . music and movement feed the human spirit, and the opportunity to learn ballet should be available to everyone," says Kent, who lives in New York and continues to dance with ABT. "The impact of the experience is not only clearly evident on the students, but also on all of those involved in the program, from the young dancer volunteer helpers, to the parents and the teachers." **B**

Virginia Myers is a freelance writer in Takoma Park.

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