

Nonprofit teaches children ballet, but it needs your help



JIM MAHONEY/Staff Photographer

Dance instructor Consuela Holmes helps 5-year-old Amara Montgomery with her steps at a workshop at Whitney Young Elementary School in Dallas. The Imagine the Impossible program gives low-income youngsters a reason to dance.

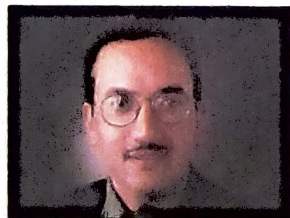
Dance partners wanted

I know as much about classical ballet as Mike Tyson knows about financial planning.

So I was a little jittery about meeting Mary Johnson, a trained dancer who has turned her love of classical ballet into a nonprofit organization that reaches out to low-income kids.

What if she asked me to spell *terre à terre* or, worse, to perform *sautés*?

Of course, I do have a little experience. I once did a brilliant *fouetté* — you know, where you turn or spin on one leg while your body is being propelled by a



JAMES RAGLAND

whipping motion of the free leg.

Unfortunately, nobody saw it except the cabdriver who almost ran me over.

Anyway, I tiptoed over to southeast Oak Cliff to meet with Ms. Johnson because she said she needed help. More to the

point, she needs support for all the wonderful kids she's training in ballet.

A little background: Ms. Johnson is the president and founder of Imagine the Impossible, a 3-year-old dance workshop that has worked with the Dallas Independent School District to provide after-school programs.

She launched the initiative after moving here from New York, where her own dance career blossomed. This newspaper has written about her before, so she's hardly a stranger to Dallas anymore.

However, as is the case with

many small nonprofits, Ms. Johnson's organization is struggling to get to the next level. She's sharing an office with the basketball coach at Whitney Young Elementary School. And her dancers are learning the art of classical ballet on the hard-tiled floor of the music and band room.

It was bad enough this summer, when she offered dance workshops for kids to keep them busy and inspired while they're on break. But once school starts later this month, she'll be forced

See **BALLET** Page 2B

JAMES RAGLAND

Ballet workshop is charity in motion

Continued from Page 1B

to constantly set up and disassemble the equipment she needs because she's sharing very tight quarters.

"We are in dire need of enough space to professionally and properly train and teach classical ballet to at least 500 students comfortably while transforming their lives," she said.

With your help, she's hoping she can find some charitable soul willing to donate the space she needs to really teach the kids effectively. An old house with hardwood floors and high ceilings would work. Or even a warehouse, assuming she can then find someone to help fix it up.

She'd even like to have lockers for the kids and a small library stocked with educational books and videos that will help them

become students of the arts.

Frankly, she can use whatever help anyone can offer, including financial support. You can contact Imagine the Impossible at 214-752-8470, or at P.O. Box 192094, Dallas, Texas 75219.

If you could just spend a few minutes watching the kids practice their pirouettes, seeing how their spirits and hopes are lifted, you'd know that Ms. Johnson isn't asking for too much.

"I like to do this," 8-year-old Brandon Stanton yelled at me as he stood on the tips of his toes.

So do you think you might want to dance professionally someday?

"No," Brandon replied, "I want to play basketball. That's why I'm doing this."

Brandon's 7-year-old sister, Taylor Veasley, told me why Brandon's really interested in

classical ballet. "My granny made him get interested," she said.

Brandon countered with a request. "Can you write this down?" he asked. "I practice here, and I practice everywhere I go."

That's for you, Grandma.

Another kid, Christopher Dell, said he was not bothered that he and Brandon are among the relatively few boys learning ballet.

"I like to do hitch kicks," he said, jumping in the air and clicking his heels to demonstrate. "And I like to stand up straight."

Christopher's mom, Sherry Dell, said the dance workshops have charmed her 8-year-old. "He likes it," she said. "It keeps him involved and out of trouble. It has helped his behavior a lot."

Even the dance instructors take note of the kids' enthusiasm.

"They're so appreciative of it," said Brittany Power, after leading one class through a series of moves. "This is a rare chance to get exposure to the arts."

Ms. Johnson and her team make it look so easy and fun, but there's work involved.

"Stop kicking me!" several of the young dancers said as they sat in a row waiting to talk to me. "You stop kicking me!"

Sorry you missed that.

But just to show you how innocent and precious these kids are, I'll share one exchange. As I was chatting with the kids, I asked one little bright-eyed girl how long she'd been dancing.

"Seven years," she chirped.

"Wow," I said. "And how old are you?"

"Five."

DallasNews.com

Wednesday, August 4, 2004
