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Better behavior by leaps and bounds

Teachers, parents say ballet program keeping boys on their toes

By REGINA L. BURNS
Staff Writer

Second-graders Christopher Dell and Johnnie Lee Marsaw III are getting high marks from their teachers and parents because of their participation in a free after-school dance program that features classical ballet.

Each week their instructor, Mary Johnson, leads them

AROUND THE COMMUNITY

through various forms of dance while emphasizing the disciplines of classical ballet. Ms. Johnson is founder of Imagine the Impossible Dance Workshop, a 3-year-old nonprofit group that educates Dallas Independent School District students in dance. Imagine is in 25 schools and one apartment complex, and has an estimated 500 student dancers.

The students are chosen by their teachers to participate in the program.

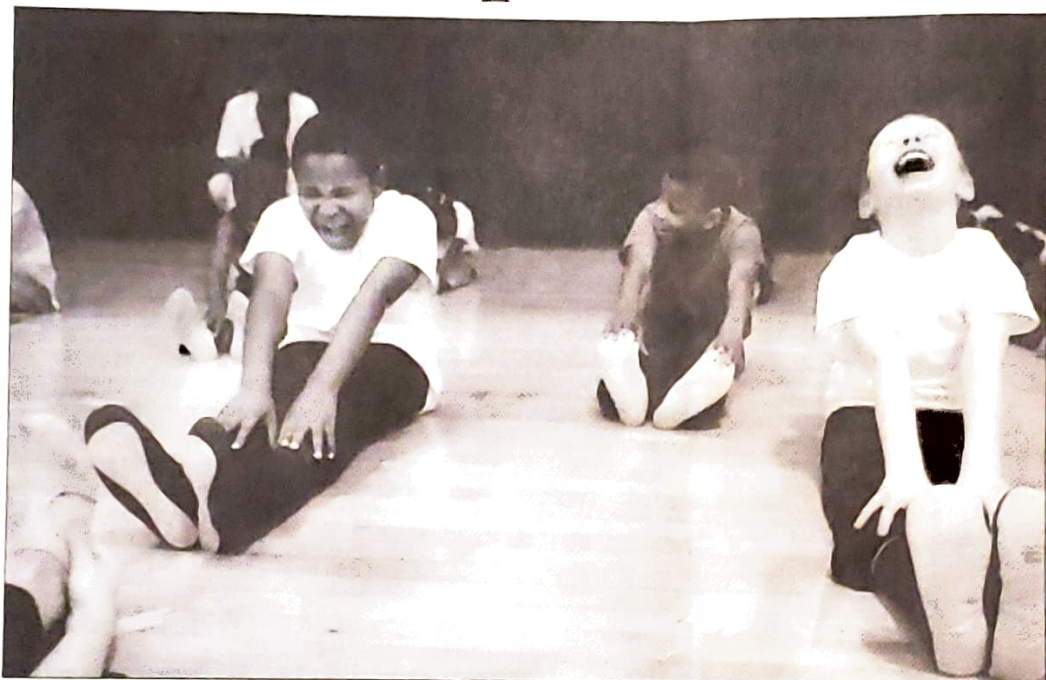
Christopher and Johnnie meet every Friday at Elisha M. Pease Elementary School's auditorium in East Oak Cliff for two hours with the other six boys and 12 girls.

"We don't get too many boys because people laugh at them and parents don't want them to do it," said Ms. Johnson. "But when you think about Mikhail Baryshnikov, Alvin Ailey and Gregory Hines, they were phenomenal" dancers.

She raves about Christopher and Johnnie, calling their performance outstanding.

Christopher is "very special, and he has a lot of ability to be an extraordinary dancer," she said.

Johnnie is eager to please, Ms.



BARBARA DAVIDSON/Staff Photographer

Johnnie Lee Marsaw III (left) and Christopher Dell (right) stretched last week during the Imagine the Impossible Dance Workshop at Elisha M. Pease Elementary School in Oak Cliff.

Johnson said: "I can tell Johnnie to do a demi plie — and he'll give me a demi plie in second position, and he'll do it with no hesitation."

The boys also have improved their grades and conduct since joining the program.

"Christopher is a hyper child. Before [he started] he would just go out there and act like a typical kid," said Sherry Dell, Christopher's mother. Now "the music there has shown him a whole lot. He's listening to the teachers."

Johnnie's teacher, Versie Lusk, said he had problems last school year.

"He's a totally different person, and he has a new outlook on life," Ms. Lusk said. "I can see him thinking about what Ms. Johnson has told him, that dancers are thinkers."

What do Christopher and Johnnie have to say?

"I like the dance routines and

the music," said Christopher, who attends Sidney Lanier Elementary School Vanguard for Expressive Arts. His mother drives him to Elisha M. Pease every Friday.

"I know how to do different dance steps, and I have made some new friends also," said the 8-year-old.

Johnnie takes a candid approach to the program.

"It's pretty good and it's a little bit hard," said the 7-year-old. "I always wanted to become a ballet dancer because I like the way that they move and the music."

Imagine is among 61 arts and cultural organizations under the Dallas ArtsPartners umbrella. According to its Web site, Dallas ArtsPartners collaborates with DISD, the city of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs and other organizations to offer arts programs to public school students and provide teachers with the training to use

those programs in the classroom.

It charges a fee to schools and pays Imagine for providing the dance instruction.

Sandra Foster, chairman of Imagine's board of directors, said Dallas ArtsPartners funding needs to be supplemented by outside donors to help the organization get its own building.

"We're in dire need of a facility," said Ms. Foster, principal at Whitney Young Elementary School.

"Our children are in desperate need of costumes. Sometimes the parents and the schools can't afford to buy the ballet shoes, the tights and the whole works."

The group has been seeking a permanent facility, such as a warehouse, but has had no success thus far.

For more information about Imagine, call 214-752-8470.

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