

PS 144 Students Dance From School Stage To The Big Screen

by Kim Brown, Central and Mid Queens Editor



Devonte Kendall and Auset Alexander perform at a Center For Arts Education benefit on Monday.

The 11- and 12-year-olds eating pizza and giggling in an upstairs conference room of Christie's auction house may appear to be ordinary children and in a sense, they are.

But an arts program at PS 144 has propelled the Forest Hills students from the classroom to being boroughwide ballroom dance champions and stars of the big screen.

Last Monday, as they waited to perform at a Center For Arts Education benefit, the students discussed taking first place in Queens during the spring 2003 Rainbow Team Match and starring in "Mad Hot Ballroom," a documentary featured in the Sundance and Tribeca Film Festivals.

"It's exciting," said 12-year-old Justin Kadarnauth. "We're going to be famous."

"We're already famous," said Arton Hadzovic, who still wants to be a baseball player, despite his dancing success. "People are paying \$750 to see us," he said, referring to the ticket price for the evening's benefit dinner that raised \$400,000 for arts education in the city's public schools. Prices, in fact, ranged from \$750 to \$2,500.

"If people are paying so much, how come we don't get any money?" Shawn Geller asked. The explanation, that the funds would be used so more students could study music, dance and art, satisfied him and the others.

"Some kids don't have arts in their schools and that's a crime," said Matthew Turk, who, since learning to dance, decided he wants to be the next Fred Astaire. "It's really wonderful to be in the arts world. The arts are just life, basically."

For the past three years the children have been training at PS 144 with fifth-grade teacher Terri Mintzer, who has given up her lunch hour every day for rehearsals. The 10-person dance team also practices on Saturdays at the American Ballroom Theater in Manhattan.

The dance program at the school was made possible with a grant from The Center For Arts Education, which has raised \$35 million since it was founded in 1996 with financing from the Annenberg Foundation.

"We've strategically used the money to help restore arts education all throughout the five boroughs," said CAE executive director Richard Kessler. "It's larger, in a sense, than the money. It's really about a movement."

Led by Chairwoman Laurie Tisch, that movement has joined over 275 public schools with more than 200 cultural and community-based organizations, as well as colleges and universities.

According to educators, successful arts programs tend to have a transforming effect not just on the students who participate, but on the entire school culture. “It’s highly motivational and teaches the students a lot of social skills,” said PS 144 Principal Susan Bahaloul. “It’s really expanded their horizons tremendously and touched everyone who’s involved.”

At PS 144 teachers use art throughout the curriculum. For example, students write scripts for performances and research the countries where the dances they are studying originated.

“It really works to create a new way to experience learning,” said teacher and arts coordinator Lois Olshan. “This particular year has been an incredible ride for all of us, the students, teachers and parents.”

The program has affected the children in different ways. Some have decided that performing is their calling, for others it’s an outlet for fun, that has instilled a tremendous amount of self-esteem.

“I think I want to be a professional performer,” said Auset Alexander. “When I perform I can open up and express myself.”

Most of the boys admitted to being wary in the beginning. “From the first second I thought it would be a torture room,” Matthew said. “But I started to love it, I started to realize how this could make you feel.”

One of the biggest hurdles to overcome was the social interaction with girls. “I was kind of scared at first,” said Devonte Kendall, 12, who likes basketball as much as dancing. “Everybody said, ‘ew, girls.’ But then I got used to it. I didn’t care anymore.”

Sitting next to Devonte, Justin agreed. “I was nervous. I thought I wouldn’t like it. But it feels good now that people want to see us dance.”

Despite the accolades and an upcoming screening of “Mad Hot Ballroom” at the Tribeca Film Festival, during which the team will have V.I.P. seats, fame is not the children’s first concern.

“Most of us love dancing because we can express our different feelings,” said Layla McGrath. “We work really hard, we’re not doing it for the attention. We do it because by performing, we can make other people happy. Entertainment has a lot to do with other people.”

As the wait to perform dragged on for over an hour, the students grew restless and amused themselves by admiring the view of Rockefeller Plaza, videotaping each other, telling jokes and skipping through the conference room.

But when Mintzer said it was time to line up, they grew quiet and serious. “As soon as you walk through that door, smile. That smile does not leave your face until you exit.”

With linked arms they walked downstairs and made their entrance into the first floor hall where 170 people were seated to have dinner and watch the performance.

The routine of salsa, rumba, tango and swing transformed the children into confident, seasoned performers, who swung their hips, legs and arms with an energy that filled the room.

When the show was over, the audience came to their feet, applauding. The children continued smiling, even after they left the room.