

# MERENGUE!

## *A program for positive youth movement*

*By John Biscello*

In public schools throughout the five boroughs, formal steps are being taken to facilitate teamwork, respect, cultural awareness, and good old-fashioned fun. Started in 1994, the American Ballroom Theater's "Dancing Classrooms" program has turned social dancing into a class act; the program reached more than 5,000 students this past year. Recently, school chancellor Harold Levy announced that \$19C million was being cut from the public school budget. It is cuts like these which usually turn public school art programs into expendable casualties, and which also make a program like "Dancing Classrooms" a rarer and even more valuable gem.

The celebrated "Fred and Ginger" duo behind the "Dancing Classrooms" con-



*Children compete in the "Colors of the Rainbow" competition this past June*

cept, are long-time dance partners, Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau. Their alliance began in 1976, when they became international dance sensations — winning the prestigious British Exhibition Championships four times.

Aside from collecting numerous other dance awards and honors, they had an opportunity to bring their nifty footwork to Broadway, where they appeared in "Grand Hotel" and received the Astaire award for "best dancing on Broadway". Their successful partnership led to the founding of the American Ballroom Theater Company — one of the only companies to present the full range of social and ballroom dances theatrically. Ten years later, "Dancing Classrooms" was created, to accommodate the public school system's need for quality arts programs.

Marceau says, "Our outreach program does many things — first of all, it teaches social skills. One of the reasons we began is that we were teaching cotillion classes here in New York, and we realized that well-to-do families felt it was important that their children learn social graces — how to introduce themselves, proper etiquette — as well as how to dance. And we felt if it was important for people who had great social standing, it was important for us, and for all the kids."

"Dancing Classrooms" is a 10-week residency, with 45-50 minute classes meeting twice a week, usually in the school's gym or auditorium. Before learning the moves, however, a minor hurdle has to be cleared by the initially self-conscious students — dancing with a member of the opposite sex. Michael Lluvera, age 11, from P.S. 150 in Queens, says, "It was hard to get used to the fact of dancing with a girl." Vanessa DeGiorgio, also age 11, from P.S. 11 in Manhattan, remembers the awkwardness of the first class. "I didn't want to touch any of the boys." Yet over the course of the 10-week span, awkwardness gives way to a fluid partnership based on teamwork, respect, and coordination. Dulaine says, "The idea is teach social skills that are transferable, and will be useful for the rest of their lives. And, as a rule, when you put two people in front of each other, in a dance hall, good feelings towards each other come out."

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