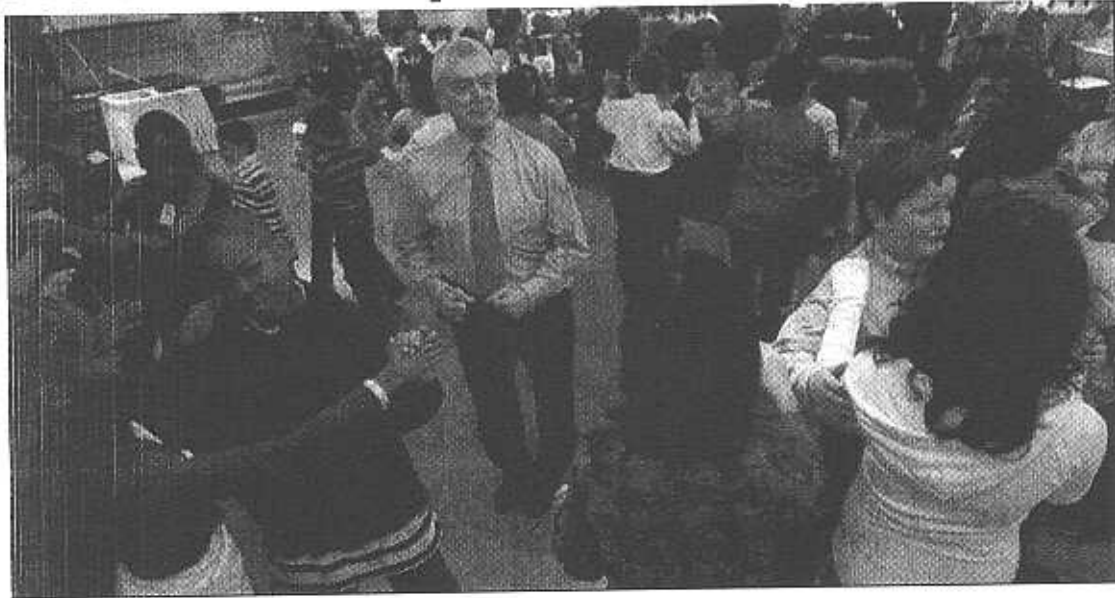


Grace under pressure



Pierre Dulaine, a renowned New York ballroom dance instructor helping the Toronto District School Board in its fight against teen violence, watches his students practice a salsa step.

A revolutionary ballroom dance project hopes to teach Toronto students in at-risk areas to choose waltz partner over drugs and crime

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"Gentlemen – twirl the ladies!"

Pierre Dulaine, the ballroom dancer who inspired last year's Hollywood movie *Take The Lead*, starring Antonio Banderas, tells his new students "Don't be afraid to smile. Show your braces."

Dulaine is in Toronto to help kick off a ballroom dancing pilot project that will begin later this month at six Toronto public schools where many students come from low-income homes.

The course – held twice a week during the regular school day – is designed to teach Grade 5 and 6 children dances such as the merengue, the rumba and the foxtrot.

But it's also designed to teach young children civility and respect for each other. It is this civility and respect that Dulaine believes the children take with them throughout their life and enables them to avoid gangs and violence.

The pilot project is based on an award-winning program Dulaine developed in 1992 – called Dancing Classrooms – which operates in 120 New York city classrooms, teaching some 12,000 kids to do everything from the tango to the waltz.

Bringing that program to Toronto students was the idea of Ilsa Abraham, a social worker, and Bob Rutherford, a former teacher and vice-principal in Toronto with 30 years experience.

Both were concerned by the increasing youth violence and prevalence of gangs and guns on the city's streets.

Abraham and Rutherford had seen both *Take The Lead* and a documentary on Dulaine's program called *Mad Hot Ballroom* and were convinced ballroom dancing could make a difference to the violence playing out on Toronto's streets.

They took their idea to the Toronto District School Board. The response was favourable, but the board had no money to implement it.

That didn't stop Abraham and Rutherford.

The pair then went to the Toronto-based Destiny Foundation and was able to secure a grant of \$100,000 to cover the cost of the pilot project.

Starting March 19, 285 students in Grades 5 and 6 at Woburn Junior Public School, Seneca Hill Public School, Guildwood Junior Public School, Church St. Junior Public School, Chester Le Junior Public School and Banting and Best Public School will begin the ballroom dance program.

It will be held two times a week for 40 minutes and will incorporate other parts of the curriculum like geography and art.

For the past two weekends, Dulaine has trained 17 Toronto dance instructors in the curriculum he has developed. This weekend he showed these instructors how to implement his techniques with about 30 Toronto students.

"No, you're not too short," he told one boy as he danced with a girl who towered over him. "You're perfect for your age."

The dance instructors dutifully took notes as Dulaine schmoozed and clowned his way through the class, quickly winning the admiration and respect of the children.

Within an hour and a half, he had taken a group of novice students and patiently taught them to merengue.

Their transformation was remarkable, turning from a rough and tumble group of 10-year-olds to a group of poised young men and women who paraded gracefully for their parents and friends.

"It gives them transferable skills for life," explained Dulaine, a ballroom dancing champion who learned to dance as a young man in England after his parents immigrated from the Middle East. "Through dance steps they learn teamwork, respect for each other, civility ... We are training future men and women to be nice, to have respect and the love of each other."

Family and friends, who witnessed the transformation of the children, were impressed. "I think children who haven't had anything to go home to, if they are interested in this, it will help them keep off the street. It'll help their self-esteem," said Sandy Walmsley, who came to watch her grandniece.

"I think it's good the kids learn to respect their partner," added Gail Izzard, who was there to watch her granddaughter.

"It teaches them discipline – that's something a lot of kids don't have these days – and an appreciation of other cultures, other music," said Ruth Cimbron, whose daughter was in the class.

"Ballroom dancing is a life lesson," added Susan Conte-Black who has a son in the class. As for the kids, they were thrilled. "I think it was very fun and I learned a lot," said Abeyan Thirunavukkarasu, 10, from Seneca Hill Public School. "I learned how not to be shy."

"It was fun, " said Vivian An, 11, also from Seneca. "I got to dance with a boy for the first time."

When the pilot project is finished the students will get to strut their stuff at a ballroom event that will be held in May at the Palais Royale. After that it will be up to the board to decide whether the program will be expanded.