

Dressed to Impress at the Team Match

BY SYDNEY SCHOEBERLE, HEART OF DANCE

FIFTH AND EIGHTH GRADE TEAMS eagerly showcased the Waltz, Swing, and every dance in between at Heart of Dance's Fall 2019 Colors of the Rainbow Team Match on Sunday, Dec. 8, at the InterContinental Minneapolis - St. Paul Airport Hotel.

Students from each school dressed elegantly to feel and dance their best – but the team of fifth graders from Jefferson Community School in Minneapolis particularly dressed to impress thanks to one generous donor: John Burns.

After an inspiring classroom visit at Jefferson, Burns reached out to Assistant Principal Andy Uhler and said he wanted to buy every boy a white shirt and black tie to wear at the Team Match.

“I was just impressed that somebody in fifth grade, maybe eighth grade, can get out and dance,” said Burns. “It was wonderful to see these young girls and young boys in awkward stages in life getting out there and practicing a little bit of social skills with the opposite gender. It’s a marvelous thing.”

Hundreds of Dancing Classrooms students, families, and educators from around the state came together for a powerful intergenerational experience of dance, music, personal growth, and community at the Team Match, and the core values of the global Dancing Classrooms program – Respect, Elegance, and Teamwork – were on full display. Confidence and joy radiated from the gentlemen at Jefferson who were dressed to the nines.

“Having some great clothes on that have been pressed, it gives you a little bit more pride,” said Burns.

Although this is Jefferson Community School's first semester of Dancing Classrooms, the school and local community accepted the program from the beginning and are now witnessing incredible personal growth in these young people. After a Jefferson volunteer invited Dr. Uhler to see Dancing Classrooms at another school, he immediately knew he wanted this program for his students.

“When I went to that school, what I saw was a classroom of fifth graders that were completely engaged – completely comfortable interacting with each other and whomever they were paired up with,” said Dr. Uhler. “They were totally at ease with each other. I thought this maturity of interpersonal

communication and comfort with other people was impressive.”

Like with most school programs, the question of funding then crept into the picture. With support from Jefferson's local neighborhood organization, the Lowry Hill East Neighborhood Association, Dr. Uhler was able to bring the benefits of partner dance to his fifth graders.

“We have so much trust and admiration for Jefferson School's hardworking and dedicated staff, and when they advocated for the Heart of Dance program we wholeheartedly supported the idea,” said LHENA Executive Director Paul Shanafelt. “We realize that most students at Jefferson don't have access to the same opportunities as others across the metro, and that even a modest financial contribution can have a tremendous impact on the ability for young people to learn and thrive.”

After a successful semester of dancing, Jefferson's fifth graders and their Teaching Artist Christopher Yaeger shared a wonderful day together at the Team Match. Jefferson's faculty,



staff, and students embraced Dancing Classrooms, and their genuine joy for the program earned them the Dennis Yelkin Heart of Gold Award. The Heart of Gold Award is given to a school that goes above and beyond exhibiting Heart of Dance's core values of Respect, Elegance, and Teamwork.

"It's very amazing because I know how some schools can't do this and it's an honor to win a trophy," said Omarion, a fifth-grade student at Jefferson. "I don't even know how to describe it—it's great. When we first started ballroom dancing, I was really nervous because I didn't know what to do. But my dance instructor Mr. Christopher taught us, and we wouldn't be here without him."

Leadership and respect were cultivated not only at Jefferson, but in students like Omarion all across Minnesota. This semester, Heart of Dance served 1,118 students in 47 classrooms in the Twin Cities and Rochester.

"Diverse and engaging programming enable the young people in our community to increase knowledge,

compassion, and connections," said Shanafelt. "The final performance and students' personal statements were evidence that they received a richly rewarding learning experience. Heart of Dance and Jefferson Community School staff deserve an enormous amount of credit for championing and directing this program."

You have an opportunity to help students just like the fifth graders at Jefferson Community School! Heart of Dance is always seeking energized Teaching Artists and volunteers.

Professional ballroom dancers and high-level amateurs are also welcome to visit our classrooms and demonstrate their skills as Classroom Dance Buddies. If you want to bring this experience to a child or school you love, Heart of Dance is recruiting classrooms for 2020, and a gift of just \$84 will bring Dancing Classrooms to another student in Minnesota! Visit www.heartofdancemn.org to learn more about these opportunities. **E**



Photos provided by Sydney Schoeberle.