

DANCING CLASSROOMS, THE GLOBAL, evidence-based Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program offered in schools by MN nonprofit Heart of Dance, excels at getting students to open up, interact respectfully, and work through challenges together—but after schools closed how was this still possible without being able to dance in person?

Heart of Dance Executive Director Andrea Miranda recognized that the need for meaningful connection would be more critical than ever during the social isolation of the pandemic, so in late March the program team sprang into action. They adapted the life-changing Dancing Classrooms program to a virtual format to ensure partner dance and social emotional learning remained accessible to the students who needed it most, although it looks a little different on screen.

“The benefits of continuing Dancing Classrooms virtually is keeping some consistency wherever possible for the kids,” says Senior Teaching Artist Heather Johnson. “Most people, and especially children, thrive with a consistent routine, and this is no exception. Staying active through movement is important for physical and mental health, and music and dance bring a feeling of joy even in tough times.”

Teaching Artist Christopher Yaeger adds, “Creating virtual lessons has given students the opportunity to continue their skills and not disrupt the success of this dynamic program.”

As any educator will tell you, virtual learning has not been ideal, but Heart of Dance, like students and teachers across Minnesota, has been making the best of things during the pandemic, offering the second half of the semester’s curriculum as video lessons accompanied by special SEL assignments every week.

Pivoting to a Virtual Classroom

BY SYDNEY SCHOEBERLE, HEART OF DANCE

For virtual lessons, students dance along to the videos on their own with a “ghost” partner, a family member, a broom, you name it—whatever makes them comfortable enough to make the most of it and keep dancing. Some examples of the added assignments to promote Respect, Elegance, and Teamwork include taking initiative to complete an ongoing chore at home without being asked, calling a friend or family member to check on how they’re doing, or writing a thank you note to a parent for all they do.

“We hope that the assignments help the students feel more like they are part of and helping their community even when they can’t be actually with them in person,” says Johnson.

These virtual lessons have proven to be a welcome moment of joy for some. Fifth grader and Dancing Classrooms Academy student Campbell Muskin says, “I really miss my dance teachers and friends, but I’m glad we still have online lessons to work from.”

When we can once again meet face to face, we are all going to need the human connection of partner dance more than ever—it is a way of connecting with someone else unlike any other. Heart of Dance’s healing programs will play a vital and comforting role in that recovery.

“Dance is a form of the arts that contributes to the overall wellbeing of the human spirit,” says Yaeger. “During uncertain times, leaning towards the arts is a way to remember how it feels to be safe and creative, and that’s critical to the recovery of society as we know it.”

The past months have taught us it’s important to keep dancing on. Digital delivery of Dancing Classrooms has been new for us and although it has been daunting at times, it has also been an exciting journey to adapt and grow—just like our students do every day! **E**



Christine Brennan and Samuel Jawer. Photo by the Dance Fest Photography Team.