

Arts in Action program inspires change

by **Melanie Johnson**

Durham Voice Staff Writer

"Music. Dance. Marriage."

These are the words fourth-graders at Eastway Elementary School are chanting in their hour-long Arts in Action dance class each week.

For the next 16 weeks, fourth graders at Eastway will meet every Thursday in their school's gymnasium. They will learn intricate, high-energy choreography set to music from trained instructors and a professional musician. The rehearsals will culminate in a final performance on March 27, where the children will perform in front of their parents and teachers.

N.C. Arts in Action, the nonprofit responsible for providing these in-school dance classes at Eastway, is one of 13 affiliates of the National Dance Institute. The program, which was established in 2005, strives to teach children confidence, motivation and respect through dance.

"We help create that atmosphere where the children feel good about themselves through exercise and music," said Mindy Solie, an Arts in Action board member.

Lisa Van Deman, the executive director of Arts in Action, said that while the classes are physical, the benefits of the program are educational and emotional, as well.

"It's really about building those 21st century skills," Van Deman said. "Unanimously the feeling is that what Arts in Action does for children has direct impact on their ability to focus back in the classroom, their self-confidence and embracing new experiences."

Sarah Delamarter, a fourth grade teacher at Eastway, said she believes the program will increase her students' classroom performance over the course of the 16 weeks. Delamarter said she uses the terminology the Arts in Action instructors use to inspire the children in her classroom.

"I say to my kids, 'Think about what we do in Arts in Action. Are you



Sarah Delamarter's fourth-grade class shows off their "crispy fingers" during an Arts in Action class. (Staff photo by Melanie Johnson)

going to give up? Or are you going to give 100 percent?"

Delamarter said she appreciates the Arts in Action classes because they are inclusive, regardless of a child's physical ability. Delamarter has a student in her class who uses a wheelchair, yet he is able to actively participate in the Arts in Action classes.

"It's excellent for him," Delamarter said. "It gets him excited and he loves doing it. The other kids embrace him and help him. They all work as a team. It's not competitive at all. It's all very supportive. It brings them together."

Alton Tisino, the Arts in Action associate assistant director and dance instructor, said he relates to the students because he has been in their position. Tisino grew up in the Texas affiliate of the program, where he was discovered by the program's founder, Jacques d'Amboise.

"He took me under his wing," Tisino said. "From there, I was changed forever and knew the arts had to be a part of my life in some capacity. I never knew that I was going to be a teacher. I just knew that I loved the arts."

Tisino said he became a teacher because he knows firsthand the impact the arts can have on a child's life.

"I was one of those kids who didn't want to be involved at first," Tisino said. "I was out of shape, overweight and I hated gym. I was always the biggest person in my class. This was the one class where the teachers didn't care what size I was. It only mattered that I gave 100 percent."

Tisino, as well as Arts in Action's artistic director, Willie Hinton, and Music Director Julie Bradley, require three things from their students: that they treat each other with respect, that they always give 100 percent and that they never give up.

Solie said the children follow these rules eagerly and obediently.

"We expect excellence out of every child, and when children are expected to do well, guess what? They do well," Solie said. "If it's an appropriate expectation, they will succeed."

Solie said she believes Arts in Action's impact spans far beyond the classroom and into the surrounding community.

"We're making Durham a better place for our children to live," Solie said. "Our program keeps kids in schools and increases their academic performance and makes them healthier children. And by keeping our children strong and healthy in school, we save our society a lot of

Arts in Action Mission:

To help children reach their full potential using performing arts as the catalyst to build focus, discipline, self-esteem teamwork and leadership.

money.”

Star Sampson, principal of Holt Elementary and former principal of Eastway Elementary, has partnered with Arts in Action both at Eastway and at Holt and said she has seen an increase in student performance at both schools. Sampson said Holt experienced a 14-point growth over the previous year, which she attributes in part to Arts in Action. Sampson said she thinks every school would benefit from having a similar program in place.

“I would like to see it at every Durham public school,” Sampson said. “It works for us, and if it works for us, why can’t it work for anybody else?”

In spite of the overwhelmingly positive response the program has received from administration, Solie said Arts in Action fights to stay afloat because of funding concerns.

“It’s tough. It’s all based on the generosity of individuals,” Solie said. “We’re not funded by the school system. We’re not funded by the city or the state. We’re needs-based in what we ask from each school.”

Solie said Arts in Action invests all of the money it secures from donations directly into its partner schools. She said it costs approximately \$15,000 to bring the program to a school. This cost includes paying the dance and music instructors, providing T-shirts to all of the students, as well as the additional costs of the final performance.

To fundraise, Arts in Action will be participating in the Volunteer Center of Durham’s 18th annual Great Human Race – a 5K race held at Northgate Mall that supports area nonprofits. Arts in Action formed a team and hopes to raise \$15,000 to expand its program to another school.

Sampson said Holt Elementary plans to support Arts in Action in the Great Human Race.

“We plan to be there,” Sampson said. “I’m trying to get the kids to join and meet us at Northgate to get everybody – even parents – to come out and join us.”

Delamarter said that if people could see the good that Arts in Action is doing in her school, there’s no reason why they wouldn’t support it.

“If people could see the joy on these children’s faces, they would understand how important these programs are,” Delamarter said. “It’s not only about academics, it’s about life.”

Van Deman said it’s especially important to have arts programs in inner-city schools like Eastway, where 92 per-

cent of children are on free and reduced lunch, because it gives the children the chance to be recognized for something they wouldn’t have access to otherwise.

“Seven homeless shelters bus into Eastway Elementary, so we’re talking about a lot of children who have very little in their lives,” Van Deman said. “These children have little to no other arts instruction whatsoever. The feeling of success and joy that happens there – these kids are so deserving of that.”

And that’s why Van Deman, Solie and Tisino continue doing what they do. They remain hopeful that, despite the odds, Arts in Action will survive. They optimistically envision a day when Arts in Action will have programs in place at all Durham public schools – and across North Carolina, as well.

So for now, at least, the children at Eastway Elementary will continue dancing and chanting in their school’s gymnasium. Van Deman, Solie and Tisino will fight to keep it this way.

“As human beings you just have to believe that good will triumph,” Solie said. “And this is so good, it just has to survive.”

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