

Ballet on Wheels takes discipline of dance, community service seriously

By Barbara Bradley

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The young ballet students resting on the floor at TheatreWorks recently were learning more about balance than you can get from barre exercises.

Ballet on Wheels Dance School director Chauniece Conner spoke to them of competing demands on their time.

"I know. I was the most active kid I knew," said Conner, 36, who was a cheerleader, a violin player and a celebrated local dancer. "But to be phenomenal individuals, you have to be able to balance that. At the end of the day, you have to push yourself."

It's the kind of mentorship she once received from the late Carlton Johnson, owner of River City Ballet, who in the mid-'90s operated the city's only predominantly black ballet company. Johnson wanted to offer ballet to young African-Americans not as a social activity, but as a serious discipline with career possibilities.

In 2002, six months after Johnson died, Conner opened Ballet on Wheels, which carries on that goal and stresses others, including community service.

The school offers all levels of ballet, modern dance, pointe, hip-hop, tap and jazz, in classes held at Evergreen Presbyterian Church and on the road in six- to nine-week programs at schools, day schools and churches.

This summer, Ballet on Wheels taught children ages 8-15 at First Baptist Church-Broad in Binghamton. The church contacted Ballet on Wheels, said Pastor Keith Norman, and found a scholarship for every child who wanted to attend.

"We didn't put a price tag on it," he said. "We were looking for ways to build discipline and teach art and expression. Our goal for the summer was not to have any child on the street without an activity to look forward to."

Between 30 and 40 percent of Ballet on Wheels' 100 or so students are on yearly renewable scholarships. One who joined the school in August on a partial scholarship is Tyler Taylor, 16, of Walker Homes. She kept dancing even after her mother, who has lupus and has been unemployed for four years, could no longer pay for lessons.

A "B student" at White Station High, Taylor has performed widely in Memphis as a praise dancer at churches and at special events, including the recent traveling UniverSoul Circus.

"I like the toughness of it," said Taylor. "It makes you strong."

When she dances, "It's like it's not even her," said her mother, Alta Medlock Smith. "It's like she goes somewhere else."

"We teach kids the importance of civic obligations as well," said Conner. Twice a year she holds three-hour dance camps for which the fee is paid with canned goods that go to shelters or filled Easter baskets that are sent to kids at Target House and Hope House. Students also help put on the St. Jude Classic by hosting a booth and serving concessions at the tournament.

Ballet on Wheels' performance team of top students dances at events all over town, some for free, including a Dress for Success fundraiser and the BENNY Awards of the local Black Business Association, both this spring.

In 2005, she organized what she believes was the first liturgical praise team dance showcase and competition that pitted church dance teams across the city and spotlighted what Conner called an emerging form of worship.

Conner grew up in North Memphis and took her first ballet lessons at age 8 when she auditioned and won a ballet scholarship.

In 1986, at age 14, she won the lead role of Clara in "The Nutcracker" with Tennessee Ballet Company, the first African-American female to dance the part in the Southeast for a mixed, professional ballet company. Her entire ninth-grade class at Snowden Junior High went to see her perform.

"I still talk about it with my classmates 20 years later," she said.

In the 1990s, she studied under Johnson, performing title roles in most of River City's performances, including Beauty in "Beauty and the Beast" and Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz."

Conner graduated from the University of Memphis with a B.A. in business and worked for 14 years for First Tennessee Bank in human resources before she started her ballet school.

Johnson was "an old-school director. He always had the last word. He was the last word. But I learned so many life lessons from him," she said.

When he died at age 47, "he left a big dance void in the city," she said. "There were students who didn't have a place to go. I felt it was my opportunity to take up the torch."

Most of her students are African-American "just because other kids have more resources," she said. And most are girls, though she hopes to attract more boys this season with a boys- only hip-hop class. She'll be enrolling students through September for the new season.

"They all have this raw talent," she said of her students. "You can see the potential they have with just some formal training."

"Dancing changed my life and I want other kids to have that opportunity."

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