

# Dance

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minutes of dance instruction from Garth Fagan's professional teachers, and an hour of healthy and safe living instruction from a variety of sources, including police officers.

In a city where violence is a fact of life, anti-violence efforts are common and wide-ranging. The effects of such programs largely can't be measured — particularly their impact on the community at large. Organizers of the program and other youth advocates in Rochester acknowledge that the program has those limitations, but agree programs like this are necessary to reach young people who are at a crossroads in their lives.

"Basically, students need something to do, if they don't have anything to do they are going to migrate to that which is most convenient and that's not always the best thing," said Ruby Lockhart, executive director of Garth Fagan Dance. "Children who are involved with these types of artistic pursuits are not engaged in other sorts of risky behavior."

## The Program

Program directors said their goal is to place students vulnerable to negative influences in their communities in the disciplined setting of a dance studio.

The YMCA has identified 80 students ages 13 to 18 who want to be part of the program and will draw from its own membership and the 4,800 students who attend four schools in the immediate vicinity of the Carlson YMCA to feed the program in the future. The program also includes



Melinda Phillips, center, a teacher from Garth Fagan Dance, leads local high school students during the first dance class at the Carlson Metrocenter YMCA on Tuesday. SHAWN DOWD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

trips to local museums, art studios and workshops on things like yoga, nutrition, bullying and others.

Students will be monitored to make sure they are going to school and keeping good grades, and at least 75 percent attendance at the weekly classes is required or a student can be dropped.

"Dance is really, really discipline," Lockhart said. "Dance doesn't suffer fools easily, because either you're going to do it, or you're not going to do it. That's all there is to it. Dance doesn't allow for flimsy excuses for poor performance."

That commitment could prove to be difficult to maintain for inner-city teens. Many of them are from low-income, single-parent homes; may have difficulty with transportation issues; and might be responsible for caring for other members of their family after school.

"Everybody is not going to survive the 11 weeks, but what we're going to learn through the students who do, and



Jeremy Cooney



James Sheppard



Ruby Lockhart



Vic Saunders

through their ups and downs, is how to better shape the program and how to use those students as ambassadors for the next group of students who come in," Lockhart said.

Ciajah Shellman, 16, said she plans to complete the program and hopes to continue with Fagan on scholarship.

"I'm very excited. I've been dancing since I was 3 years old; I love it," said Shellman, who is a junior at World of Inquiry High School.

"I'm ready to take on anything that Garth Fagan has for me."

She and her fellow student dancers will be schooled in the Fagan Technique, which is an "athletic and precise technique that combines elements of modern dance, Afro-Caribbean dance, and ballet."

Vic Saunders, who leads the city's gang interdiction program, Pathways to Peace, said the Fagan program will challenge the students both physically and mentally.

"Listen, Garth Fagan dance, you have to be an athlete, there is no joke about it," Saunders said, and laughed.

"I'd be surprised if a lot

of football players were able to do it."

Saunders, whose group traditionally works with young people who have already become engrossed in gangs or criminal activity, said it's just as important to work with kids who have not yet gotten to that point, but who are at risk of getting there.

"Early intervention is key, if it was up to me, we'd do home visits as soon as somebody signed up for Head Start. You'd be able to see the type of cycle that has gone on for years."

The program will have the greatest reach if the students involved return to their neighborhoods with a positive message, Saunders said.

"These programs are working for the kids who are involved in them," Saunders said. "They have a vested interest, they want something different for themselves, but I'm not sure it's trickling down to the individuals who are actually acting bad in the community."

## Outreach

The pilot program was created by Garth Fagan Dance as part of its community outreach and is

paid for by money from the National Endowment for the Arts. For the first group of 20 kids and the second — who will begin classes in January — the bill is about \$150,000.

It was developed in part as a response to the dwindling after-school programming in the city, and the increasing troubles at the Liberty Pole several years ago where hundreds of teens were made to transfer buses on their way to and from school.

The Pole, which is within a mile of the Carlson YMCA and the Garth Fagan studio and offices, became the place where hundreds of students congregated for hours, rather than go home, and trouble began including fights, drug dealing and general disorder, particularly after school.

That's why the dance classes will be held between 3 and 6 p.m. — the time Shellman and Chief James Sheppard said teenagers are most likely to engage in negative behavior.

"A lot of kids usually after school they go downtown, some of them are up to no good, fighting, or just not doing what they are supposed to do," Shellman said.

Sheppard said he hopes students like her will help change that.

"We want them to be leaders, and with them having the exposure to the Rochester Police Department and the Garth Fagan folks and go back and talk with their peers about the

fun they're having or the engagements they're having, and maybe when they see an officer on the street, they'll recognize them and they'll say, 'I know that officer, I can talk to him,'" Sheppard said.

Next to the disruption and disorder at the Liberty Pole was another constant: spontaneous dance.

A recent survey of students by the YMCA showed that dance was the most popular activity requested by students when asked what they would like to be able to do after school, said Jeremy Cooney, vice president of development for the YMCA of Greater Rochester.

"Here we are, both of us three blocks from Liberty Pole and we're so frustrated that we're not engaging these youth, and this is such an interesting and creative and dynamic way to engage these youth as well as incentivize them to behaviors that we find desirable as a community — school attendance, being off the streets in those afternoon hours," he said.

## What's ahead

Cooney and Lockhart said they are hoping the program will continue past the pilot phase, but will need private donations to keep it going as the money from the NEA won't last.

"From our perspective this is exactly the type of collaborative partnership that we'll hopefully see more of in the nonprofit world," Cooney said.

Students who stay with the program and work hard will have a chance stay with Garth Fagan Dance on scholarship, Lockhart said.

Over time, the hope is that the students will begin to take their own steps. And how they move will be up to them.

"The movement and the technique that we teach is a reflection, and it comes out of the students themselves," Lockhart said. "They have to find their own voice, just like our professional teachers."

"People learn to be individuals while working collectively, so that's the voice that they're going to start finding."

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