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Dancer Glen Lewis of Island Moving Company in the classroom

# Better Together

A Rhode Island dance company and elementary school collaborate.

BY MEGAN KEOUGH

“No sounds, third-graders! I shouldn’t hear any talking!” Christine Sandorfi stood, hands on her hips, facing 27 rambunctious third-graders at the Claiborne Pell Elementary School in Newport, Rhode Island. The students, clustered in small groups on the yellow and gray-striped art-room floor, snickered and jostled one another while Sandorfi walked over to her iPod docking station to start the music. It was the first day of the Pell School Residency—a collaboration with Island Moving Company, a Newport, RI-based ballet company—and Sandorfi, a dancer with the company, was teaching them the steps of their class dance. Everything had been going smoothly up to now.

The students had thrown themselves into learning the movement with surprising enthusiasm—spinning, making superhero shapes, hopping along the floor. Today, however, Sandorfi had asked them to do the unthinkable: hug one another.

The students were supposed to jump up and embrace, then fan out, keeping their arms around each other. Their last few attempts had included groans about possible cootie infections, awkward pats on the shoulder and even a fist bump—but very little hugging. “Third-graders, this dance is about acceptance,” said Sandorfi over the opening strains of the class’ musical selection. “Everybody sit crisscross applesauce facing the back, and we’ll try this again.”

“It is an atmosphere where there are no wrong answers. Where else can a kid feel like that these days?”

—Miki Ohlsen

While Sandorfi’s students scrambled to get out of touching one another, the group in the music room next door learned how to move in canon, and the group in the library received a crash course on simple partnering. In fact, five third-grade classes in all were busy preparing dances as part of the residency. For a full week in January, Sandorfi and four other members of the Island Moving Co. created choreography with the nearly 180 third-graders at the Pell School. The Island Moving Co. has been working with students in area schools for more than 15 years, teaching them rhythm, choreographic patterns and levels of movement. The residencies are often based on a theme, and this year’s is Better Together—a fitting idea, since Pell is the new unified elementary school for the whole district.

“When we meet with a school that wants a residency, we talk about what their needs are, and then we suggest or let them choose a theme that speaks to what they are trying to accomplish,” says Miki Ohlsen, artistic director of the company. “Many schools have chosen Better Together of late, because all schools are struggling with the ideas of accepting each other and celebrating difference.”

Though few of the students at Pell have formal dance training, Ohlsen finds that it isn’t an issue. Simply including a hip-hop move the kids have seen on TV or adapting something that seems flashy—like a pirouette—hooks the students and gives them a sense of accomplishment. “It is an atmosphere where there are no wrong answers—only opportunities to explore the possibilities,” she says. “Where else can a kid feel

like that these days?"

And while Ohlsen and the company members choreographed parts of the dances, they left room for some student artistic freedom—a count of eight where the kids can fly like Superman wherever they want, for example, or the freedom to choose their own pose. “The more input the students have into what they are creating, the more invested and engaged they are,” she says. And the more they take away from the experience in the end.

During the residency, Ohlsen and the company artists not only encouraged collaboration among the students, but also between disciplines. Each class received a word that served as inspiration for their dance: unity, acceptance, support, respect and tolerance. But Ohlsen and her dancers asked the students to reflect more deeply on their word, so they had the third-graders create a piece of writing based on what the class word meant to them. Then, during the end-of-week



Third-graders at Claiborne Pell Elementary School learned about collaboration and cooperation through dance.

performance, a few students in each class read that piece aloud to introduce their class dance. This cross-disciplinary approach helps connect the movement the students learn with the literacy curriculum at school. And by giving the students a voice in the creative process, the Island Moving Co. members teach them how to work together to create something—a perfect application of the week’s theme. “The residency,” says Ohlsen, “therefore also becomes a lesson in collaboration and cooperation.”

And it is a lesson that the Pell students learned without being aware of it. By the fourth day, even the most resistant of Sandorfi’s students barely cringed as they wrapped their arms around their classmates. Some even cracked a smile. “Movement levels the playing field for these kids,” says Ohlsen. “It’s the common denominator.” **DT**

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