

Duke City Fix – Tuesday, 11-13-07

Modern Dance at Navajo Elementary School

Posted By Johnny Mango

NEAR BARCELONA & COORS SW – The students of Yvette Groves' class knew the three rules by heart. And when dance instructor Jackie Oliver raised her hand the class shouted in unison. The whole portable building vibrated from the steel beams under the floor to the tin roof.

Work hard!

A whole class of 4th and 5th graders, 27 of them, eager to dance...eager to learn new steps...and perhaps just as eager to show what they could do to the two visitors who couldn't stop smiling.

Never give up!

Adelita and I looked into their faces. They seemed ready to take on the world.

Personal best!

We knew we were watching something very, very special.

The program is part of National Dance Institute of New Mexico. NDI started out in New York City about 30 years ago. It has been a part of New Mexico arts education for the last 10 years. In Albuquerque NDI-NM serves 1148 students in 14 locations. Jackie Oliver is the Albuquerque Artistic Director. Todd Lowry is Musical Director.

“Excellence is the message; dance is the medium.”

If ever an educational organization had its head screwed on straight, it has to be this one. Their mission statement says it best...but let's look at what's in front of us: a dance class filled with the joy of hard work and success.

There are things to note about the above video. For instance how do they keep those rambunctious kids interested in dance? Strong rhythms, big movements, and a lot of stomping. The dance the kids are learning is actually loosely based on doing the laundry: washing, hanging, drying, then folding and putting them away. This not only helps the kids remember the sequence, it reinforces the carry-over between class and home. I like the idea of kids using the motions of household chores.

Another activity had the kids sitting in a circle and passing a clap around the group. A student had to anticipate when the student next to him was going to clap and try to clap together...then turn and do the same with the student sitting on the other side. They timed how long it took the 'simultaneous' claps to make it around the circle. Of course it was not long before the whole class realized that if they did it in a rhythm they could

anticipate the next clap more quickly. They were so proud when they set a school record: 11 seconds.

Ms. Groves Has Something to Say

The classroom teacher, Yvette Groves, walked across the room to make sure I understood what the program meant to her students. She told me how she believed the program carried over into the rest of the school day. She said that it helped her kids academically and socially...that they were able to focus more. She went on to say how some of the kids had blossomed this year directly as a result of the program.

In fact, her classroom mission statement is now based on the three rules of NDI-NM: Work hard. Never give up. Personal best.

Nothing Happened

I know how schools are under a lot of pressure. Those tests are killing the spirit of both kids and teachers. There seems to be no time for “frills” that will never show up on a standardized test. Oh, everybody says they support the Arts in public schools, but all they want to talk about in the press is whether or not a school makes “adequate yearly progress.”

But how do we know what the real benefits of this program are? Show me where Motivation is measured. Show me where Helping with family chores is noted. Show me how to explain on a standardized test that this child worked harder in class...and achieved something very difficult personally...no matter what his or her circumstances. Show me where it says, “No fights on the playground.” Show me the circle to mark for Proud, Happy, Helpful, or Respected.

There is nowhere to say, “Of all the terrible things that could have happened, nothing did. And oh, by the way, he danced all the way through high school.”

A Waiting List

There is a waiting list for schools to participate in the NDI-NM program. And there is a need for money. Spend some time on their website. You will be amazed. By the way, DCF bloggers Sophie and Adelita work for NDI-NM in the development office.