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MONTGOMERY ARTS



Choreography of the Planets

Using dance to teach science – and more – in public schools

By Lisa Traiger // Photograph by Erin Tunbridge

TO TEACH THE SOLAR SYSTEM TO FIFTH GRADERS, THERE'S nothing better than dance. That's what Adrienne Clancy believes. The Silver Spring-based dancer, choreographer and educator has been working in the Montgomery County Public Schools since 2001, providing curriculum enhancement and arts enrichment for pre-schoolers through high school seniors. She and her company plan, often in collaboration with MCPS teachers, dance-focused units that cover subjects from social dances in physical education classes to school-wide anti-bullying activities to science and math curriculums, American history and health.

"The connection of education is integral with dance," says Clancy, who danced for three years with noted community-dance proponent Liz Lerman before founding her own company and earning a PhD in dance. "When I teach, I become a better performer ... and, of course, teaching itself is a performance," she says.

When dance and movement are incorporated into a variety of academic subjects, anecdotal evidence shows that student engagement increases, learning is enhanced and retention reinforced. "On a daily basis seeing those changes happen in the classroom, that gives me a sense of hope and transformation and that keeps me going," Clancy says.

This school year, ClancyWorks Dance Company is working in 12 county schools, sometimes providing one-day

assemblies, other times one-week and two-week residencies or afterschool programs. Funded through the Department of Recreation or private-local government partnerships, the out-of-school enrichment programs help students who may otherwise not have opportunities for dance or music, robotics, homework help and other extracurricular activities. Clancy and her company members work toward building physical skills and teaching dance concepts, while also providing experiences in problem solving, the creative process and community building among diverse student populations.

Some money for the programs comes from the school's own budget and is supplemented by grants from the county and state arts councils. The Maryland State Arts Council earmarks some funds for arts integration to schools that exhibit greater need, especially

in the up-county area, Clancy says.



Fifth-grade space science provides a perfect example of how dance can enhance an academic subject while also exciting kids. "We work with the classroom teachers and look at the curriculum," says Clancy. "A big concept is the difference between rotation and revolution. For kids, the two words can sound similar." In dance terms rotation means pirouettes or maybe head spins. A day or two later, the dancer/educators – usually two for every 30- to 40-minute lesson – have the students pair up and re-enact revolution, one orbiting the other. "We also do verbal raps to reinforce the concepts because the students have to verbalize these ideas on a test," Clancy says.

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By putting the sun and planets in motion and using their own bodies as models, kids remember and understand the concepts. "We like to have ClancyWorks teach astronomy through dance before we teach it," says fifth-grade teacher Cathy Haddad, who had a ClancyWorks residency in her class last year. "They do a wonderful job introducing vocabulary and concepts through movement. Our students are very receptive to this type of instruction. It also helps to get them moving, increases their flexibility and exposes them to the art of dance."