

The American DanceWheels Foundation (ADF) and University of Delaware Collegiate DanceWheels Program began as planned on February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 and ended with its final performance on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2008. The classes were taught twice weekly by able-bodied wheelchair dancer and expert, Melinda Kremer, professional dance instructor and judge, Pete Taylor, and wheelchair expert and dance athlete, Ray Leight. From the very beginning the college was excited and pleased to be the first in the nation to have an accredited wheelchair ballroom and Latin dance program that partnered people using wheelchairs with people standing.

Coverage from a number of local newspapers and public and community television networks informed the community about the American Style Wheel One™ curriculum, and the project that would bring people with and without disabilities together. The new president of the University of Delaware (UDel) made an announcement about the nation's first Collegiate DanceWheels classes and the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation Quality of Life Grant in a message to Delaware's students and faculty in his opening publication. Curious students from the community and heads from the university's departments of nursing, rehabilitation, physical education and special education came the first day of classes to watch. Ralph Ferretti, Professor of Education and a member of ADF's board of directors and Pat Grim, head of the nursing department and the Ballroom Dance Team at UDel, kicked off the beginning of the course to the audience.

With all of this enthusiasm for the project, there were still hurdles to overcome. In the beginning we walked into a gymnasium with eleven standing dancers and two seated dancers. Identifying students as standing or seated dancers was a problem that I had not anticipated, yet due to HIPA laws we were not permitted to ask about the students' physical ability. Because the class was so heavy in standing partners we incorporated the seated dancers from our Crystal Dansport class in Delaware and our Atrium Dance Studio class in New Jersey bringing the number of seated dancers up to eleven and standing dancers to twenty. Ultimately, there were eleven wheelchair dance couples. Logistically the combination of classes was difficult to coordinate because of transportation issues, both for the university students and for the dancers in wheelchairs, but ultimately it worked well.

The classes consisted of instruction in the basic rumba, cha-cha, waltz, fox trot, and a taste of tango with the standing dancers learning the first three

steps of each dance from the ADF's instruction manual. Most classes began with exercises for both the seated and standing dancers to enhance their posture and to give them an understanding of how their bodies and wheelchairs can move most efficiently. Exercises focused on using the core of one's body and how to create fluid movements in dance. Standing dancers learned the able-bodied steps, as well as the wheelchair dancer's part so that they would have a better understanding of the complexity of dancing in a wheelchair. Seated dancers learned their steps and how to position and direct their wheelchairs to dance with someone standing. All of the dancers learned to connect to their partners, which was quite challenging due to the varying physical limitations and strengths of the people with disabilities and even the so-called able-bodied partners. Some connected with both hands, some partners with one hand, and in two cases the connections were visual. Ironically, the so-called able-bodied partner was the reason that there was no connection in one of these partnerships, because her physical strength limited her from actively helping the wheelchair dancer move his chair. The seated dancers (some regular users of wheelchairs and some seated for the purpose of the class) were all required to move to rhythms and counts, making their strokes or in the case of power chairs, movements, painstakingly precise. Men seated and standing learned the language of dance to lead their ladies, and ladies seated and standing, learned to take their lead.

Classes also consisted of discussions about the challenges people with disabilities face on a day to day basis. A number of the discussions were led by some of the students with disabilities and our wheelchair dancer and teacher, Ray Leight. We talked about physical and emotional obstacles that come from within themselves and society, as well as the lack of good equipment, and access to everyday places and social activities. This dialogue continued throughout the lessons and the standing dancers began to have a broader understanding of people with disabilities. In addition, the dancers with disabilities came away from these discussions with more understanding of the fears and reservations that seem to be prevalent among their able-bodied classmates and society in general.

One of the challenges, I personally experienced, was the distant attitude that the university students came to class with from the beginning. Only a couple of them knew each other and we immediately saw the need to create a fun and informal atmosphere to get things started. By the beginning of the third week it became clear that this group's interaction needed to be more

intimate, not only because they were dancing with one another, but also because there were people in the class that really needed each others help to be successful. I pointed out how important it is for this class to become involved with one another, and told them that they were required to simply greet each other at the beginning of every class. It took a couple more classes before the students remembered to say hello without my prompting. These greetings helped the students begin to dialogue about their weekend, their class load, and their lives. As their relationships developed, the able-bodied students began helping the students with disabilities on and off with their coats, helped them fasten their seatbelts for dancing, and helped them get to and from class in the rain. We found students practicing before the class and students standing and seated, making arrangements to go clubbing. Many of the dancers wanted to get some extra dance time in and began coming to wheelchair dance classes at some of our other locations. This group had bonded and they were friends having a great time dancing.

The final performance began in the evening on May 19<sup>th</sup>. The students were very nervous, but excited about dancing with multiple partners and showing their family and friends what they had learned that semester. The forty nine people in the audience were just as excited for the dancers and they brought flowers, cameras, and good luck wishes to all of the performers. The seated dancers danced each of the dances twice with two different standing partners. One of the standing partners to dance with the seated dancers was from our regular wheelchair dance classes at Crystal, Atrium, or the UDel Ballroom Dance Team. The other standing dancer was from the University of Delaware Collegiate DanceWheels Program. Each couple executed the same steps with each of their partners proving that the syllabus could be duplicated over and over by anyone that has taken the course. Everyone was fabulous!

The evening was documented by a number of amateur cameramen, and all of the dancers gave their personal thoughts on what the program meant to them. As the evening came to an end, Pat Grim told me that the university wanted to do the class again in the fall and that some of the current students wanted a more in depth class for independent study. The plan is to have one 1 credit class and one 3 credit class in the fall. The University of Delaware recently sent out a feature article in their alumni magazine, The Messenger, about the past and upcoming wheelchair ballroom and Latin dance classes, and interested students and faculty are anxiously waiting for the next semester. There has also been interest from two other universities in Pennsylvania and

we are hoping to dialogue with them about setting up classes on their campuses.

I think it is fair to say that the University of Delaware Collegiate DanceWheels Program was a success and fulfilled all of the expectations that we strived to accomplish. The students developed long lasting relationships with each other and tremendous social and emotional growth as people both with and without disabilities. The group developed confidence and cooperation amongst each other and learned to connect not only as dancers, but also as friends. The students can use their newfound expertise in the real world as they have a good understanding of movement (either standing or seated), and of music and partnering. All of the students are able to identify the steps of each dance, and lead or follow depending upon their sex. Every student is more aware of their posture and body control regardless of their physical ability and their movement in a wheelchair. Everyone improved their concentration and their awareness of the world around them.

It is my feeling that this ground breaking program should be used everywhere that people dance. American DanceWheels Foundation thanks The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation again for their support and vision. This program proved...Everyone Can Dance!!!