



Making a Difference Through Dance

Local dance studio's charity is changing lives by giving back.

BY HEATHER HOLTSCHLAG

Shari Opfermann, owner of Dance Workshop By Shari, developed the philosophy of “Dancing For A Difference” as a way for her staff and dancers to give back.

Since 2003, the studio's Dancing For A Difference program has sponsored a variety of activities and events to raise money for the community, including Bring A Friend to the Studio for National Dance Week, A Unity in Community 5K Run, Relay for Life teams and various variety shows that have included the studio's own dancers as well as groups from the community.

Dancing For A Difference, which officially became a nonprofit organization in 2008, gives students the opportunity to do what they love – dancing and performing – while making a difference in the lives of others, says Opfermann.

“All of the studio dancers and families are invited to get involved in some capacity,” she explains. “They can do so either by volunteering, making a donation or performing. We usually have about 60 to 100 dancers from the studio involved in the benefit performances. Additional children



from area schools and churches add to the participation, bringing the total involved close to 500.”

Opfermann says the dancers are between the ages of 5 and 18, and most are involved in the Dancing For A Difference program by dancing, singing or playing a musical instrument. The most celebrated annual performance is “Gifts Of Dance and Other Offerings,” a fundraiser for the Free Care Fund of Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC, that takes place annually on the first Saturday in December at Baldwin High School. Two performances are presented that day, one in the afternoon and one in the evening. This past year marked the 12th annual performance.

The event is supported by the studio, local church choirs, school choruses and musicians, local high school dance teams and drama clubs — and even the stage crew and students from Baldwin High School. It’s a true “children helping children” event.

In spring 2015, Opfermann started a new event called “Dance For Life,” which is a performance by the Dance Workshop by Shari company dancers, The Shining Stars. The event takes place at the Community College of Allegheny County South Campus Theater, and all proceeds benefit St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital.

“Dancing For A Difference provides a positive message of TEAM (Together Everyone Achieves More),” Opfermann says. “As part of a team effort with the dance teachers, parents and students, we can make a difference for others by giving back through the use of our talents and gifts. The message we want to deliver to our community is that we care and want to be involved.”

Mt. Lebanon resident Tracey Green’s two daughters, Ellie, 6, and Emilee, 10, have been dancing at Dance Workshop by Shari for four and six years, respectively. Green says it feels good to know that her daughters are involved in a program that is actively giving back to others in need.

“Emilee was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes two years ago, and what could have been a tragic time in her life turned into a lifetime of good memories from Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh, where she benefited from the ‘extra things’ she received that were made possible through various fundraising efforts. Things like games, blankets and even a Build-A-Bear all made for a more positive experience,” Green says. “From that perspective, it has been an eye-opening experience for her to learn about other kids who may need help too, and she now has the opportunity to help them.”

It is not just the dancers and other performers who get excited about rehearsing and performing the benefit shows. Opfermann says the feedback she’s received from the dance studio parents and the surrounding community has been very positive as well.

Rehearsals for the benefit performances begin two months in advance with dancers learning their choreography. A finale is practiced in two rehearsals with all of the dancers. And, a stage rehearsal takes place the night before the performance, which allows all of the groups to practice their part on the stage.

Over its 12-year run, Gifts Of Dance and Other Offerings has raised more than \$62,000 for the Free Care Fund of Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC. The Dance for Life performance raised \$3,000 in its first year, which was donated to St. Jude’s Children’s Research Hospital. The total amount given from various Dancing For A Difference events since 2004 is about \$115,000.

Other dance studio-sponsored events involve the adult fitness classes participating in a Zumbathon, a “Party in Pink” event in October to raise money for breast cancer, and a “Go Red” event in February to benefit the American Heart Association and raise awareness of heart disease in women. ■

» For more information about Dancing For A Difference, visit www.DancingForADifference.com or www.DanceWorkshopByShari.com. You can also call the Dance Workshop by Shari studio at 412.884.5099.