
Tango lessons for blind teens

Visually impaired kids learn dance, gain social skills and self-confidence

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MIAMI, Florida - On the edge of a makeshift dance floor in the cafeteria of the Miami Lighthouse for Blind, 18-year-old Heriberto Puig and 16-year-old Patricia Alvarez joined hands and practiced their steps together as music from another time and culture filled the room.

In an age of hip-hop, rock and salsa, they and about two dozen other blind or visually-impaired teens were learning the intricate art of Argentine Tango, and in the process found they had gained a whole lot more in terms of physical stamina, social skills and confidence in themselves.

"This class has helped me mature a lot," said Alvarez. "I'm not a big ice-breaker. To start to ask somebody to dance is not my thing, but I can do it now that I've gotten more involved in this class."

Two women with a passionate idea

The idea for a dance class for blind and visually-impaired teens came from two South Florida women who love tango passionately. Dianne Basha Castro, an interior designer, and Carol Durbin, who specializes in making facilities accessible to the disabled, wanted to share their love of this historic dance with others.

"One day I woke up and it just was like lightning, I knew," said Castro. "I said, I know what I have to do, I have to start a non-profit, and that's a way of giving back to the community."

Castro called her friend, Durbin, and together they excitedly hatched a plan to secure funding to form The Shimmy Club, a non-profit organization dedicated to teaching tango to the blind and visually-impaired.

With her experience as an advocate for the handicapped, Durbin was convinced that tango and the blind would be a perfect fit. "It's a dance where it's a connection. You don't have to see, you don't have to talk, you don't have to hear, all you have to do it feel and follow and lead," she said.

After securing a \$50,000 grant from The Children's Trust in Miami-Dade County, and \$10,000 in other grants and private donations, they brought their idea, and some professional

instructors, to the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, a training and rehabilitation facility where they were warmly received.

"It is very innovative, very creative, a wonderful way to teach and to engage teenagers in a lot of different skills that they need to have to meet their social needs," said Tatiana Palma, the associate director of adult services at the Lighthouse.

Beyond everyone's expectations

The after-school tango classes began in June, and at first many of the teenagers who signed up were a bit shy and hesitant, especially about dancing with a partner. "It forces them to come out of their shell a little bit," said Palma.

Gradually, the students warmed to the idea, and began to engage themselves in the dance lessons, finding that, indeed, tango was tailor made for them. "It levels the playing field for them. No one's blind in the class. They're just a bunch of teenagers all working together to dance tango," said Durbin.

While the founders of the Shimmy Club and specialists at The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind initially believed tango lessons would be good for the students, they really had no idea, they said, just how important those lessons would become in several aspects of the teenagers' lives.

"It makes them feel important, it makes them feel secure," said Castro. "It makes them feel comfortable with other people, it makes them feel that they're able to express themselves within a social setting."

Heriberto Puig, during a break in one of the classes, said he has learned the importance of being strong and responsible for the safety of the partner he leads on the dance floor. "You're dancing with a lady and she has to have confidence in you that you're not going to let her go or let her fall and that that you're not going to hurt her," he said.

In the beginning, many of the students found the tango classes to be taxing physically, and were eager for break-time so they could sit down and rest. As time passed, though, they began to get stronger.

"Now they stand and dance the entire class and then during the break they dance, so they're getting this exercise as well that they never got before," said Durbin. "This is so exciting to see the changes and growth in them."

As the weeks of classes moved by, the students kept coming back and seemed to really enjoy having a place to connect with others. "For some of them, we didn't realize, it's the first time that they've touched another person outside of being led somewhere," she said.

"This has given them the opportunity, a wonderful rich opportunity to be able to dance with somebody else in a social way in a non-threatening environment" said Palma.

As it turned out, she added, this class was the only after-school activity specifically offered for blind and visually-impaired students in all of Miami-Dade County.

With all the students dancing in a large circle around her, Yanira Collado called out instructions to the boys leading the girls. "Gentlemen, start with your weight on your right, and you're going to switch to your left on the beat." She was forgiving when two of the couples veered into each other. "It's okay if you bump into someone, it happens," she assured them.

An instructor moved by students

Collado is one of the professional tango instructors who agreed to help the students here, and is deeply moved by their commitment. "It fills me that they want to be here" she said. "When I teach these guys I leave here and I'm full of energy, you know, and I feel loved. It's very different that when you're teaching an adult."

She has also noticed remarkable changes in her teenage pupils. "They're very comfortable with their bodies now," she said. "Before they would sit separately, now they're not afraid to touch each other or go ahead and pick somebody up and start dancing."

More than anything, Collado says, she enjoys seeing them have so much fun. "They have a place to come, to socialize and connect with somebody else," she said.

Founds believe tango could work anywhere

Castro and Durbin are convinced their Shimmy Club program for teaching tango to blind and visually impaired teens could easily work in other cities--providing they can get the requisite funding.

They have discussed their ideas with officials in New York City, Philadelphia and elsewhere in Florida. "I couldn't be more confident that we will hopefully be able to reach other people's lives in the same manner," said Castro.

After watching the young couples maneuvering on the dance floor, Durbin said she came to appreciate how much this opportunity actually meant for the students, who often were socially isolated, because of their disabilities. Just a few weeks into the program, though, the students

were leading. And, according to everyone involved, they seemed to be doing so with increasing grace and confidence.

"They've benefited socially, emotionally, cognitively," said Palma. "Has it improved their lives, has it made a difference? It most certainly has, and they've enjoyed it."