



## Leading the Blind

Teaching dance to visually impaired children is a two-way street. BY AMANDA SILLIKER

Ten-year-old Gabriella Mendonca looks like all the other dancers in class: black leotard, pink tights, slightly worn slippers, hair neatly pulled back and standing in a tight first position. During a port de bras, a teaching assistant whispers in her ear, “Left arm up,” and shifts her arms into fourth position. Later, the TA holds out her own arm and Gaby uses it as a barre to support her jumps. From plié to révérence, Gaby’s technique and musicality are right on par with all the other 10- and 11-year-old boys and girls participating in this monthlong National Dance Institute summer intensive. Only at the end of the class, when a friend takes Gaby’s hand and guides her to her dance bag, does it become clear that Gaby is completely blind.

Since April, Gaby has taken dance class once a week with other visually impaired students of Lighthouse International, a Manhattan nonprofit that offers services and classes for the blind. Impressed by Gaby’s progress, her dance teacher invited her to take part in the NDI intensive, where she would study alongside sighted dance students.

Founded in 1976 by Jacques

d’Amboise, a principal dancer with New York City Ballet at the time, NDI programs reach more than 35,000 public school students in New York City each year. As part of its mission to make dance accessible to every child no matter the socioeconomic status, ethnicity or disability, NDI collaborates with Lighthouse International’s Filomen M. D’Agostino Greenberg Music School to hold dance classes for students who range from low vision to completely blind. The result is a learning opportunity for both teacher and students.

Dancer and NDI teaching artist Jenny Seham conducts classes for children ages 7 through 18 every Saturday at the Lighthouse. Getting the students moving is a main goal, so jazz dance is taught with emphasis on jumps and high-energy movement. Seham runs the classes the same as her others in the NDI method: with repeated exercises, a live accompanist and high standards. She stresses the organization’s philosophy of not “dumbing down” the classes and says the students respond very well to the strict regimen.

“The challenge is to figure out how I can communicate the passion I have for dance when they can’t see my body,”

Seham says. “The thrill is to find out how to stretch myself so that I can communicate with them as a dancer.”

Seham has taught for NDI for 20 years and won their Teacher of the Year Award in 2003. She holds a PhD in clinical psychology, and as assistant clinical professor at Columbia University, she specializes in working with special needs children, including the visually impaired.

Working with groups of 10 students each, there is a volunteer or teaching assistant for every two children. Their job is to physically manipulate the dancers’ bodies when a new step is introduced. Seham uses much more descriptive language and imagery in her teaching than when she works with sighted students. Rather than making a general statement like, “Open and together,” she’ll say, “Open the door and close,” so the students can associate a visual image with a particular move. Once they learn a pattern of movement, she labels it as A, B, C, etc., so she can later simply say, “Do move A.” The students have amazing muscle and music memory, she says, and it’s “very striking” how easily they remember a combination.

Gaby Mendonca (center), who is visually impaired, performs in NDI’s production *Imagine*.

One major goal is for students to gain a better awareness of their bodies. “They come in with sloping shoulders, tension in the neck and the upper back, and walking very tentatively. We gear the program toward what has been limited to them,” Seham says.

Like most dance teachers, for instance, Seham constantly reminds her students to stand up tall, lift their chins and keep their shoulders down. She says it is particularly important for this group to perform head isolations (up, down, right, left) because blind people don’t tend to move this way in their daily lives. By the end of the program, the students stand taller and move more comfortably than they did at the beginning.

Gaby’s mother, Marcia Mendonca, says the experience has matured Gaby and she has made a lot of new friends at her dance classes. Dr. Leslie Jones, executive director of the Lighthouse music school, also notes the extensive social benefits of the classes, especially for adolescents. “They are more eager to go to school dances now because they actually have steps that they can use,” she says. “Sighted people don’t think about it because we can just mimic it, but to be taught steps that you can employ in a social venue is a wonderful thing.”

NDI and Lighthouse International first joined forces from 1988 to 2004 through the Lighthouse Saturday youth program. The partnership relaunched in October 2008—this time through the Lighthouse’s music school, which has strong financial support. “We hope to continue to develop the partnership,” says Ellen Weinstein, NDI artistic director.

Seham would like to add advanced classes to the schedule, and she dreams of implementing the program across the country. “Visually impaired children really don’t have access to this,” she says. “When they’re young, there may be a creative movement class, but after that there is nothing. Nothing.”

“The Saturday classes are the highlight of my week,” says Seham. “It’s changing the lives of these children, and in turn it’s changing mine.” DT

*Amanda Silliker was a 2009 summer intern for Pointe magazine.*

Photo by Mary Walker, courtesy of National Dance Institute