

Program teaches dance to students with special needs

By Julie Slack
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Everyone can dance regardless of ability. That's the premise behind Dance Elite Milton's program Dance Ability.

Dance Ability is a special needs dance program designed and taught by Milton dancers Jade Ryan and Mallory Ryan. The sisters run the program out of Dance Elite Studio for the Arts, where they grew up learning to dance and where they're now instructors.

Both of them are occupational therapists and were thrilled they could introduce the program to Milton four years ago.

It sees more than 35 students from Milton and surrounding areas experience dance when they otherwise might never have had the opportunity.

The program is designed for people three to 23 years old with varying special needs, including autism, developmental delays, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy and learning disabilities.

Jade, 23, and Mallory, 26, put their heads together four years ago and decided a program for people who may never have had a chance to dance before is something Milton needs.

They were confident their long-time dance



Dance Ability, a program that teaches dance to students with special needs, will be featured in a 30-minute television special this Saturday. Here, program creators (from left) Jade and Mallory Ryan pose with National Ballet dancer Sonia Rodriguez and Dance Elite Studio for the Arts owner Marnie Palmer. Rodriguez, who was inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame, is part of the 30-minute special. She visited the studio earlier this spring, when film crews attended to tape the show.

teacher, friend and owner of Dance Elite, Marnie Palmer, would be keen on the idea when they introduced it to her. She was, and immediately supported the pair as they introduced it to the community through the studio.

Since then it's taken off, nearly doubling in size to three classes for girls, who learn a variety of dance styles, and one class for boys, who learn hip hop.

Each class sees students with one-on-one

volunteer support, allowing the program to reach out to local high school student volunteers as well.

"We come in and run this program like any other dance class," explained Jade. "It exposes them to dance and all the benefits that dancing provides.

"It also teaches them physical and emotional development."

Palmer said she finds watching Mallory and

Jade teach the students an amazing experience.

"To see the emotion and the excitement on the faces of these students, is one of the most wonderful experiences for me," she said.

Dance Ability will be featured on a half-hour television show *Walk the Walk* this Saturday. One of six episodes on Global Television that highlight people doing good things in their community within the arts, the show will air at 10:30 p.m. It was filmed at the studio this past spring. Crews spent more than a week interviewing staff and students.

Walk the Walk is an extension of Canada's Walk of Fame. It pairs up last year's Walk of Fame inductees with community members — in this case, National Ballet dancer Sonia Rodriguez, who visited Dance Elite to meet with the program creators and Palmer. Rodriguez also welcomed them to Toronto to take part in a dance session with her.

Milton's Walk for Riley, an annual event that raises funds for cancer research, will also be featured on *Walk the Walk*. It will air at 10 p.m. this Saturday. The episode includes a visit by Canadian musician Tom Cochrane.

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