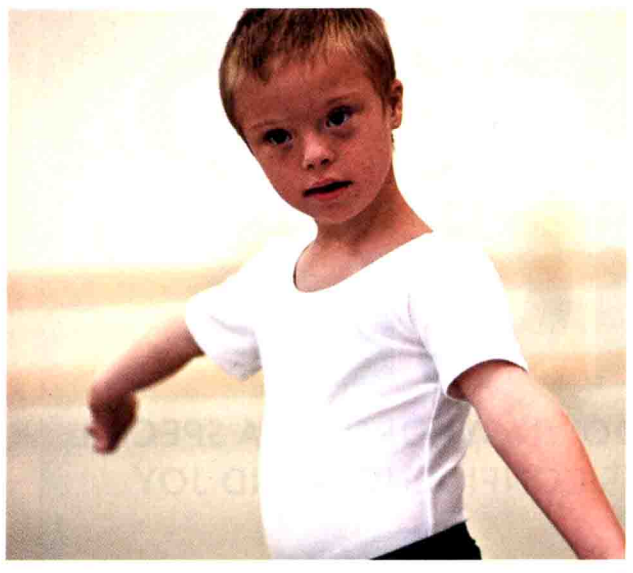


A CHANCE TO DANCE

FOR A GROUP OF CHILDREN WITH DOWN SYNDROME, A SPECIAL DANCE CLASS IN BOSTON BRINGS CONFIDENCE—AND JOY

"These kids blossomed through dance," says program director Mickey Cassella (with Faye Jones, standing; from left, Jillian Spinale, Henry Brill, Sarah Markowitz, Susan Clough and Isaiah Lombardo, with Ashley DeNoble, front).





It's 8 a.m. on a chilly Saturday, and instead of sleeping in, 13-year-old Isaiah Lombardo is in a white leotard and black shorts, proudly leading a Boston dance class in exercises. "All right, dude!" says Isaiah excitedly, cheering on a fellow student as he points and flexes his right foot. "I like this class because my friends are here. And I love to shake my booty!"

And that's no small feat: Isaiah and his 13 classmates have Down syndrome. For many of them, basic coordination used to be a challenge, but now they spin and sashay, more or less on cue—thanks to Mickey Cassella, director of physical therapy at Children's Hospital Boston, who in 2002 teamed with the Boston Ballet to create the first-of-its-kind adaptive dance program. While ballet pros like Gianni Di Marco teach—offering the class at a nominal fee—Cassella, 67, and other physical therapists lend a hand as the kids spend an hour bending, stretching and bopping to the beat of a drum, ending each class with a group hug—"My favorite part," says Faye Jones, 15.

Cassella delights in watching her 43 enthusiastic students, who range in age from 6 to 19. "They've gone way beyond my wildest expectations," she says. "When I see their smiles—that's everything to me. That's the joy of movement."

By Sharon Cotliar and Kristen Mascia



HAPPY FEET: Joey Giuffre enjoys a solo (top left); "The students' self-esteem shows," says teacher Gianni Di Marco (with class, top right); Amanda Kelleher (middle left); Susan Clough shares a laugh; Casey O'Donnell (far left, bottom) with Daniel Rej, Matthew Raposo and Sebastian Newman. "Never in 100 years would I have thought my son would be dancing at the Boston Ballet," says one parent.

