

# Shining Stars Lisa Root's Dance Class

The DSANI Shining Star recognizes those individuals who contribute to the local Down syndrome community by educating others about the abilities of those with Down syndrome. Lisa Root, a DSANI member, is a dance instructor who made a significant impact recently in teaching a class for children with special needs. Kathy Meeks, mother of dance student Kristy, said the following about Lisa, "When Lisa told us last fall that our girls were going to memorize a dance and perform it by themselves with no help in front of hundreds of people in June, I doubted it was possible. I think it was a great accomplishment that they were able to memorize the dance but I really wondered if they would all freeze up when they got on the stage in Homestead's auditorium and saw all the people. At times, they might have been a couple of beats off, but they performed the routine from beginning to end with no problems. Kristy loved the attention and the applause. Lisa was wonderfully patient with the girls and believed in them from the beginning. Not only did the girls show all of the other parents and students of what they were capable, they also made believers out of their own parents."

## Lisa's story:

As a dance teacher for 24 years, I'd thought many times about having a special dance class but hadn't put the plan into action. Growing up the older sibling of a brother who has Down syndrome, I had a strong desire to work with

other children who have Down syndrome and to allow them to be in a dance class of their own. I realized I had a great opportunity to offer a special needs jazz class



Samantha Gavette, Stacey Fox, & Kristy Meeks

after attending the first DSANI meeting. In the fall of 2000, three girls with Down syndrome signed up to take the class. At that time I had no idea how Kristy Meeks, Stacey Fox and Samantha Gavette were going to affect my life or what impact these 3 little girls would have on hundreds of other people.

As we got to know each other, I was able to plan my lessons according to the interests and abilities of Kristy, Stacey and Samantha, although their class was basically like every other class I taught. The girls followed the warm-up portion of class, practiced their kicks, leaps and turns across the floor, and then learned routines to

their favorite songs. One of the best parts of class was deciding on a song for them to dance to for the June recital, to be held at Homestead High School. They enjoyed the idea of a song from ANNIE, so we chose "You're Never Fully Dressed Without A Smile." Kristy was especially fond of the musical and mentioned to me that she definitely needed to wear a red dress and that I could make an appearance as Miss Hannigan! It took a bit of convincing before they agreed that they could all dress like Annie and that no one in the class had to be Sandy the dog! When I began teaching the dance, they learned all the steps that went with the lyrics and we added a few more motions each week. The instrumental portion of the dance was a bit harder, but the girls began to hear when the phrases changed and before I knew it they were doing the entire dance without any help from me at all! Every time I watched them practice I

pictured them on stage, realizing how emotional it was going to be for all of us. I also thought about how lucky I was to have this experience. It was an honor to hold their hands as we danced across the floor and to know they looked forward to coming to class each week.

It was very exciting to see the girls in their costumes on the day of dress rehearsal and they did a fantastic job being on stage for the first time. The next day at the recital, performing for an audience of 650 people, they looked adorable and danced wonderfully. The girls had the entire audience clapping and

whistling for them and almost everyone I spoke to afterward told me that they were touched by the performance and that it brought tears to their eyes. The most remarkable comment came from a young woman without children who told me she had always been afraid of what she would do if she had a child with special needs. She said after seeing that Kristy, Stacey and Samantha were able to take a dance class, learn their entire routine and then sparkle on stage in their sequined costumes, it made her realize that they were having the same experience as everyone else and she wouldn't be as afraid anymore. I'm not sure if I absorbed it at the moment, but the more I thought about her comment, the more I realized that Kristy, Stacey and Samantha had not only brought something special to my life, but that they were able to touch and hopefully educate all 650 people that came to see them that day. I know that I will never forget the smiles on their faces as they finished their dance, struck their final pose and the lights dimmed to wild applause. I've never seen such complete joy and happiness and I've never been more proud of anyone in my life.

-- Lisa Root