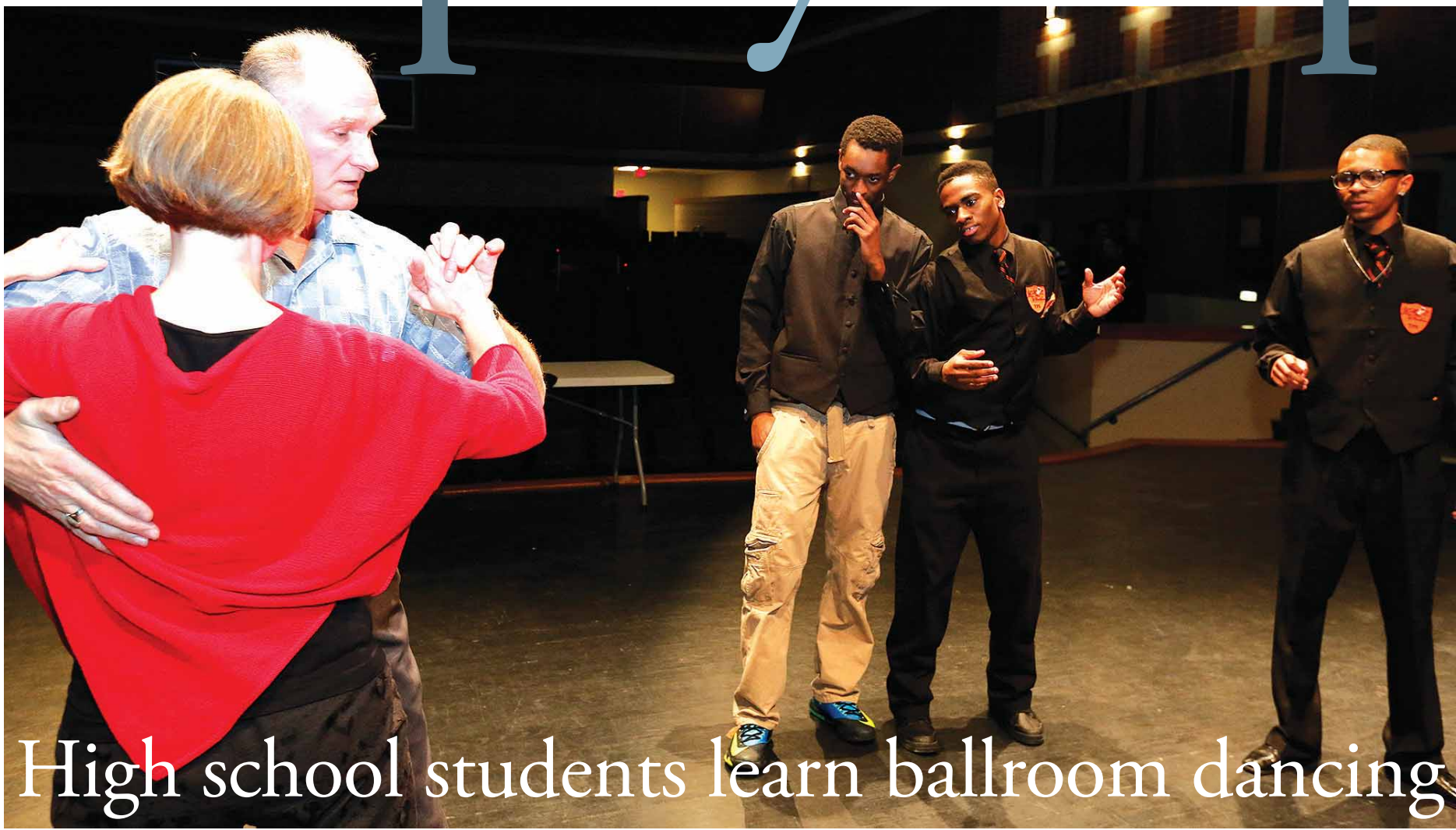


StepbyStep



High school students learn ballroom dancing

BLADE PHOTOS BY JETTA FRASER

Instructors Jennifer Jarrett and Dave Morris demonstrate the waltz to Woodward High School students Daijour Barnett, left, Isaiah Jefferson, and Dayshawn Jones.

By MIKE PEARSON
BLADE FEATURES EDITOR

We are born knowing how to dance. Just look at the number of YouTube videos of toddlers bouncing around as though their toes were on fire. But dancing with style is an acquired trait, beyond the bold haiku of the twerk in a poetic realm that might rightly be called sublime.

So it is on a brisk March afternoon in the cafeteria at Woodward High School in North Toledo, where two dozen teenagers sit rapt while members of the Northwest Ohio Dance Club twirl effortlessly around the floor, executing the meticulous moves of the tango, the rumba, and the waltz.

They have come to show the teens some of the dances they might master. Forget frenetic new age or techno beats. This afternoon, it's strictly ballroom.

For five weeks the young people have gathered after school under the auspices of the Young Men and Women of Excellence program run by English teacher Meighan Richardson. Past projects have included painting murals and volunteering at the Ohio Theatre, but with cotillion and prom season just around the corner, the students jumped at the chance to learn something more formal, something that combined rhythm and grace.

Ms. Richardson had expected convincing the students to be harder.

"The first class we only had four boys and a lot of girls, and it wasn't so much skepticism as nervousness as to where to put their hands and that sort of thing," she recalls. "That went away very quickly because they like to perform and this is just a new performance genre for them."

Far from scoffing at the vintage steps of the swing, the assembled students at this largely black school seem mesmerized by the amount of space ballroom requires. Even when it's a close contact sport — the tango entails a firm embrace — between the twirls and lunges, a pair of partners might cover an acre of ground before a song is over. Ballroom dancing demands room to breathe.

It also inspires a great deal of laughter, not at anyone, but with everyone. These teens couldn't be less connected with the outside world — no tablets or cell phones or iPods — but seem very much connected to one another as they correct an arm position or a dip and try their routine again. And they smile. A lot. You'd hardly know this was school.

Sophomore basketball player Daijour Barnett is all grins as he talks about ballroom dancing.

"In school you are strictly down to business, but when you come here to do ballroom it's just so much freedom you can have. All you need is a little bit of rhythm and anybody can ballroom dance."

Adds his dance partner, junior Lyric Carter: "You get to add new moves and jazz it up. We're doing the fox trot but you can add your own moves to express yourself. It's happy."

It's not all fun and games. Ms. Richardson hopes lessons the students learn about breaking down barriers will serve them well in life.

"This skill is one that shows change doesn't have to be that scary, and even though it might make them uncomfortable, if they just put a little time into it they can still do it," she says. "There's a lot of teamwork going on here. ... A lot of these kids aren't enemies, but they aren't necessarily friends in the general population of the school. But in here, as long as they have a partner they don't care who they're dancing with."

"It doesn't seem like you can dance and be unhappy."

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Lyric Carter, left, and Dayshawn Jones practice their ballroom dance steps.



Lynette McBayer, left, and Isaiah Jefferson, with instructor Dave Morris.



From left, Woodward High School teacher Meighan Richardson, Isaiah Jefferson, Lynette McBayer, and instructor Jennifer Jarrett share a laugh.



Dance teacher Jennifer Jarrett helps Dayshawn Jones, a senior, understand the proper amount of hand pressure for waltz partners.



From left, Willie Watkins, Brittany Schrencost, and Danielle Bowman demonstrate their own moves.

