

## Woman's goal is to bring dance to state's school kids

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When Shirley Berger moved to Chapel Hill in the fall, she brought with her a vision to reach as many children as possible in North Carolina schools through dance.

With the help of Jacques d'Amboise, a friend and founder of the National Dance Institute, Berger is doing just that.

"Many of the children involved with NDI come from deprived family situations and the total experience gives them a sense of 'I can do this' and a real sense of community," she said.

Recognized as one of the finest classical dancers of our time, d'Amboise now leads the field of education with a model program that introduces thousands of school children each year to the magic and discipline of dance.

After Berger moved to The Cedars of Chapel Hill Retirement Community, her friends Mel and Zora Rashkis introduced her to Deshera Mack, the principal of Rashkis Elementary School in Meadowmont, and Berger described the NDI program to her. Mack wanted to learn more and soon made arrangements to get the program under way.

In April, d'Amboise visited the school and took the fourth-grade class through three days of lessons that ended with a performance on the fourth day.

"It was amazing to see that after three hours of instructions the kids were dancing and loving it, along with 30 teachers," Berger said. "The parents were delighted with the results, and it was a life-changing lesson in dance."

D'Amboise founded the not-for-profit National Dance Institute in 1976 while still a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet in the belief that the arts have a unique power to engage children and motivate them toward excellence. According to d'Amboise, the dance programs help children develop discipline, a standard of excellence, and a belief in themselves that carries over into all other aspects of their lives.

To date, the NDI has introduced d'Amboise's art form to more than 1 million elementary schoolers across the country, from inner cities to Indian reservations, in its 28 academic years.

"It started small, and became a runaway train to heaven," d'Amboise has said.

Since its inception, NDI has grown into one of the nation's largest arts organizations. Each year, the programs of NDI inspire thousands of children from diverse ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds, including children with physical and emotional challenges.

Berger, who moved into The Cedars from Santa Fe, N.M., met d'Amboise at a community pool in Santa Fe. Berger approached him and said that she had heard about what he was doing in the local schools and wanted to get involved. She was invited to serve on the board of NDI of New Mexico, which she did for a number of years. She also sponsored a complete NDI program at Alvord Elementary School in Santa Fe.

Children who have attended NDI programs across the county have better attendance, increased academic scores and come away with a greater sense of self-confidence and joy. NDI

classes help build a sense of community that, in the best examples, transcend the classes and affect the whole school -- 91 percent of in-school coordinators and 62 percent of school teachers report that the NDI program improved school climate. A majority of teachers reported that the program increased parent involvement.

Berger was involved in many nonprofit organizations during her 13 years in Santa Fe. She founded and established a state-wide yearly competition in Santa Fe with Pro Musica of Santa Fe and The Chamber Music Festival of Santa Fe for young aspiring artists.

"Anytime you can be involved in helping our youth, you help everyone's future," she said.

Berger wants to see how the program works at Rashkis. She hopes other schools will hear about it and will want to jump on board.

"The long-term goal is to have this in as many North Carolina schools as possible," she said.

Today, NDI affiliate programs disseminate teaching methodology and artistry to 45,000 children through replicated programs in California, Colorado, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, New Jersey and Virginia. Berger is organizing a fund-raising campaign with d'Amboise and spearheading the local NDI initiative. To learn more or to become involved with NDI, contact Berger at 919.259.7022.