



Respect 90® Foundation Volunteer Spotlight

Says Joe Maddon: "The volunteers are the unsung heroes. Without them, none of our efforts occur." Every month, the Respect 90 Foundation will salute a distinguished volunteer from the communities of Tampa Bay, Chicago, Mesa, Arizona or Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Respect 90 will present a \$1,000 grant to that volunteer's charity. Should you have someone who is deserving, please let us know.



Penelope Capeci | Down For Dance

Penelope Capeci had just finished her dance class when she noticed a flyer on the bulletin board of the studio. Her eyes focused on the photographs of dancers working with individuals with Down syndrome.

"I'm going to try and do that," she said to herself while staring at the notice from Down For Dance (DFD), a Southern California not-for-profit organization that offers dance instruction to those with Down syndrome.

Why not? She loved helping the youngest dancers at her own studio. She was, by any measure, an "old soul." Volunteering seemed like a natural fit. Except one thing.

Penelope is 12 years old.

"Normally we only take volunteers starting at the age of 14," says Sari Anna Thomas, co-founder, artistic director and an instructor for DFD, "but we are always happy to consider an interested candidate on an individual basis." The concern is that the younger volunteers don't always know how to implement structure in the classroom, and DFD classes offer a healthy dose of structure and dance technique.

That didn't seem to matter to the seventh grader from Christ Lutheran Elementary School, who began dancing at the age of four.

Soon, DFD had its youngest volunteer in the history of the program. Every Monday, when Penelope is not taking her own classes including tap, jazz, contemporary and improv, she is helping dancers with Down syndrome with their hip hop lessons.

"She jumped right in with a smile on her face," Sari recalls. "She brings such authentic enthusiasm to the class, she engages, is eager to learn and has been a dream to work with. I can't say enough about her."

The feeling is mutual.

"I love to see how happy they (the dancers) are to be able to do something that could be really hard for them," says Penelope. "I try to give them the same opportunity I've had, but in a different way."

In the meantime, Penelope has put the experience to good use by developing a life plan that belies her age.

"I want to become a professional tap dancer, I want to be able to continue to help this program and I want to open a dance studio only for kids with Down syndrome," she says without hesitation.

Her maternal grandmother isn't surprised by any of it.

"She's a rock star," says Shelly Snow, her maternal grandmother and guardian. "She's always been mature beyond her years, always been comfortable with handling responsibility and being around older people. When she was eight years-old she was dancing with kids in junior high."

Penelope says this opportunity wouldn't be possible without Shelly and her Uncle Rocky, Shelly's son, who have been with her every step of the way not only providing encouragement but for the countless car trips to and from dance for the past eight years. "They have had my back at every turn," says the energetic wunderkind.

Shelly also sees something else. "Being around older kids, she's had to have some tough skin sometimes and she's had her own personal challenges. I think that helps her connect with these kids. She calls them her best friends."

Officially created in August 2017, DFD spawned from a shared passion of Sari and Annie: to bring high quality arts programming and specifically dance programming to those populations that are not normally exposed to these forms of artistic expressions.

Says Sari, "Years ago I was working for another non-profit that has a similar mission and Annie started volunteering for one of the classes I was teaching and the rest is history. She was incredible and through a series of events and experiences, we decided we wanted to start our own. She was the kind of volunteer you only dream of, and we became dear friends fast. We were on the same page when it came to our vision and where we wanted this to go. Annie has an older brother with Down syndrome so she grew up very connected to the Down syndrome community." Annie is co-founder and the executive director of DFD.

DFD started out with 20 dancers. Eighteen months later, that number has grown to 60. Classes are offered at six locations throughout Southern California, but Sari and Annie have a greater vision.

"We would like to spread this around the globe so that every individual with Down syndrome has access to high quality dance classes," says Sari who would also like to expand the program in other ways. "We currently offer classes for ages 7 and up, but we know there is such a strong need for more programming for kids ages 2-6. We are moving in that direction."

Sari, a Seattle native who moved to Los Angeles where she began her own professional dance career, is quick to point out that DFD doesn't exist without its volunteers who help to create a consistent teaching model that is critical to this kind of training. "Individuals with Down syndrome really thrive on routine and knowing what to expect and who to expect. So as much as we can keep things consistent in the classroom from week to week, the more they are going to progress and the deeper they are going to be able to dive into the curriculum," she explains.

"We try as much as we can to have a ratio of one-to-one. One volunteer per dancer, so they are really getting that personalized attention while developing and cultivating a friendship at the same time. I have found that when those kinds of relationships are found in the classroom, the progress we see from the dancer increases tenfold." DFD also has a unique scale for grading progress. "Everyone's version of success is different," says Sari. "One of the things I love the most about doing this kind of work is celebrating everyone's version of success. These dancers are not only far more capable than they ever thought they could be, but also more than the community at large. Dance is an art form, which means we get to encourage and celebrate everyone's own version, and move away from comparing it to mine".

And, unlike similar programs, DFD takes its show on the road so that the dancers are also exposed to the performance aspect, which is such an important part of receiving a well- rounded dance experience. Sari seeks out year-round performance opportunities for the dancers. It is not uncommon for the DFD performers to appear at the Special Olympics in Los Angeles, various charity events or any events put on by the Down Syndrome Association of Orange County throughout the year. The dancers are treated like the pro's complete with hair and makeup artists who also volunteer their time.

"It's totally overwhelming when you receive this kind of support from so many people when it comes to a program you've created. It's very humbling," concludes Sari.

– Rick Vaughn | Executive Director, Respect 90 Foundation



DOWN FOR DANCE

For more information on Down For Dance,
go to www.downfordance.org.