

By leaps and bounds



SANDY SUMMERS/DN
TOP: STACEY WONDER stretches at the barre before beginning her rehearsal. Wonder is the founder of the Ballet Omaha's group Wonder Wheels. The group provides opportunities for paraplegic dancers to express themselves through modern dance.

RIGHT: STACEY WONDER rehearses a dance she will perform for a spring performance at the Omaha Community Playhouse.

Wonder Wheels takes dance to unique level

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior Reporter

Dance



OMAHA — As the first few strains of Bach cascade across the room, dancers fly in from stage right, their wheels gliding across the shiny gray dance floor.

With amazing speed and agility, they spin and change directions. Their arms alternate between manipulating their wheelchairs around the stage and creating shapes representative of the music.

The dancers are associated with the Ballet Omaha group Wonder Wheels. Together, they are taking modern dance to a new level, a level that includes wheelchairs.

Wonder Wheels, founded by Omaha resident Stacey Wonder, provides dance classes and performance opportunities for paraplegic dancers. Wonder, herself, teaches weekly classes for children and young adults while Omaha dance instructor Susan Dickson-Matsunami teaches a monthly class open to everyone. The dancers also rehearse a repertoire, which they plan to perform in the spring.

Wonder's idea for Wonder Wheels originated during her rehabilitation after an accident in 1994 that left her paralyzed from the waist down. Alegent Health Centers put her in contact with the Cleveland Ballet group, Dancing Wheels.

Wonder was inspired by Mary Verdi-Fletcher, a dancer with spina bifida who founded Dancing Wheels in 1980.

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STACEY WONDER
Wonder Wheels founder

dancer," Wonder said. "Since then, she's been proving everyone wrong."

Wonder reviewed videos of Dancing Wheels' performances and then decided to approach Derrick Wilder, Ballet Omaha's managing director, with the hopes of starting a similar group.

"She came wheeling into the office, and I didn't know what to say," Wilder said. "We watched a video together of wheelchair dancers, and then I realized all the possibilities."

New movement

For their first project, Wilder choreographed a duet for himself and Wonder called "Keys to Imagination," with music by Yanni. "The theme is that the audience doesn't know who is disabled and who is not," Wilder



SANDY SUMMERS/DN
STACEY WONDER adjusts her ballet slipper during a rehearsal Tuesday afternoon. Wonder said her involvement with ballet has helped with her rehabilitation.

said. "When I was choreographing, the movement just sort of flowed out of the body. When we perform, grown men cry. I can't believe the kind of response we've had because I didn't choreograph it with that intent."

The duet premiered at Ballet Omaha in November 1996. Since then, Wonder, Wilder and, more recently, Dickson-Matsunami have been working to expand their knowledge of wheelchair dancing.

This summer, Wonder attended a summer camp sponsored by the Cleveland Ballet. Twenty-five sit-down dancers and 20 stand-up dancers attended the eight-day camp. The dancers met every day for eight hours to rehearse repertoire, practice technique and

improvisation.

Wonder now incorporates the technique she learned from the Dancing Wheels dancers into her own classes.

"There's a variety of skills you must learn," Wonder said. "We do a combination of classical ballet and modern dance, but we must also work on wheelchair mobility and technique."

Classes start with a warm-up emphasizing cardiovascular health, flexibility and strength. The dancers then move to longer combinations emphasizing locomotive movement. Finally, the dancers work on spatial orientation.

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