

Atascosa

DARE students dance for health

San Antonio Express-News - May 2006



Victoria Vela joins other members of the DARE Dance pilot program during a practice at Elm Creek Elementary School, a Southwest Independent School District campus, in Atascosa.

They stumble through a slow one-two-three count dance routine, their movements not quite in sync and their toes far from pointed. They can barely keep up, but the fifth-grade students at Elm Creek Elementary School's DARE program, their bright red "DARE Dancer" T-shirts knotted tightly behind their backs, are eager and impatient for more.

"Can we do it faster?" they ask.

Dance instructor Ashley Bell, looking not much older than her students, walks to the stereo and picks a 1980s tune from The Cars to set a faster tempo.

The handful of students -- mostly girls except for two boys who take their place in the back of the group in the cafeteria -- have been meeting as part of the DARE, **Drug Abuse Resistance Education**, Dance pilot program launched March 1 at the Southwest Independent School District campus, located at 11535 Pearsall Road.

It's the only school in the San Antonio area and one of about 100 nationwide participating in the program, meant to keep children safe and drug-free by teaching them to dance. The goal is that, at the end of 10 weeks, the students will perform for their peers, parents and teachers.

Bell said that at Elm Creek, jamming a dance routine into a 10-week session made teaching difficult, but the students have benefited.

"I've noticed their attention spans are a lot more honed," she said. "I want them to learn about their bodies and how to move them and function. And with DARE, we look to give them something to do instead of being out in the streets so they're not tempted to try drugs."

The program also teaches students how to use the right and left sides of the brain, Bell said.

Victor Lopez, 10, thought DARE would just be talks about staying away from drugs. So when he heard about the dance program, he was surprised and curious to see what it was all about.

He signed up thinking he probably wouldn't like it. Now, he dances at home every chance he gets.

"I like the way it makes you feel good if you're sad or happy or feeling any kind of emotion," he said. "It makes

you want to get up and do it again."

The program is funded through San Antonio Sam's Clubs and by DARE America, said Bexar County Sheriff's Deputy Teresa Ochoa, instructor with the DARE program. She hopes that next year the program will expand to more area schools if funding is received.

"We will make some changes. It's only our first year, and so it's only going to get better," she said.

For Amber Salinas, 11, the program is already pretty good.

Amber has always liked dancing. She began when she was about 4 and bugged her parents to get her involved in cheerleading. The DARE program let her do a little extra dancing on the side, she said.

"I just feel excited whenever they tell me something new," she said. "It makes me feel good."

It's the same for Jose Sanchez, 11, who never had danced before attending the DARE program. Now he feels like a real dancer.

"When you really want to move, you can start shaking around and moving around," he said.

Dancing is something that Victoria Vela, 10, always has wanted to do. It's fun learning new tricks, she said. Her favorite thing to do so far is leaping.

But she's learning more than just dancing, she said.

"I've also learned that even though you can't do a dance routine, never give up trying to do your best and it will come out good for you," she said. "Later in life you're going to need to learn that to achieve success."

