

ENTERTAINMENT

Madison adaptive dance program makes new moves at MYArts

By Victoria Davis, Special to the Cap Times

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Luw Joy Seamon (left) leads Paul Saeman and Kathryn Woods during an ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA) adaptive dance class at Madison Youth Arts.

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Five years ago, an extraordinary dance performance opened Christina Martin-Wright's eyes to what dancers with disabilities could do — how a person could move an audience without full physical mobility.

Soon after joining the creative nonprofit ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA), executive director Martin-Wright drove up to Plover to watch a dress rehearsal for a collaborative program between AFA and Point Dance Ensemble called Laura's Dance.

Martin-Wright sat in the dance studio and watched as a teen dancer named Olivia performed a piece choreographed by a younger, disabled student named Laura. Laura was nonverbal, used a wheelchair and had various serious health issues.



Martha Siravo and Luw Joy Seamon high-five each other while practicing choreography during an ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA) adaptive dance class.

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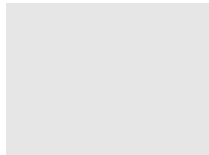
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“I had no idea what to expect,” Martin-Wright said. “As I watched Olivia, I wondered how someone like Laura could choreograph a dance like this. I had my own biases and assumptions but, as I watched this performance, I kept looking over at Laura, watching her movements.

“After the dance, Laura was helped out of her chair and onto the dance floor. She scooted and moved around, and I saw so many of the movements that Olivia had performed. It blew my mind. I thought, ‘I just watched Laura’s inner self on stage.’”

ARTS for ALL [says in its mission statement](#) that it aims “to expand the capabilities, confidence and quality of life for children and adults with disabilities throughout Wisconsin” by providing programs in the arts. Jean Kennedy Smith founded Very Special Arts in 1974, and Very Special Arts Wisconsin was an affiliate of that program. In 2019, organizers changed the name to ARTS for ALL Wisconsin. It offers classes in visual arts, musical instruments and dance, all geared toward people with disabilities.



Instructor Patricio Cierna encourages student Jasmine Siravo during an adaptive dance class at MYArts.

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The organization has its own choirs and hosts curated exhibitions. The Creative Power Awards celebrate the accomplishments of people with disabilities in Wisconsin.

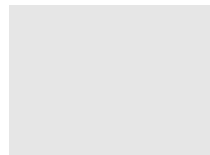
Now, Martin-Wright is working on a new initiative with AFA that is directly connected to the first time she saw Laura harness the confidence to perform her own

piece. Made possible with support from a two-year grant from Madison Community Foundation, this pioneering initiative will feature a diverse range of dance classes tailored to accommodate various disabilities, including but not limited to physical, sensory and developmental challenges.

Dance fever

The new effort was prompted by a [case study](#) done by Milwaukee Ballet dancer and University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate student Janel Hutchinson in 2022, exploring the lack of adaptive or inclusive dance programs for children and adults with disabilities in Dane County.

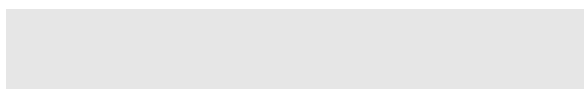
Hutchinson’s research took place over the course of eight weeks from June to August 2022. She interviewed 16 parents and caregivers of people with disabilities, six local dance teachers, and seven individuals working at local organizations that serve people with disabilities.

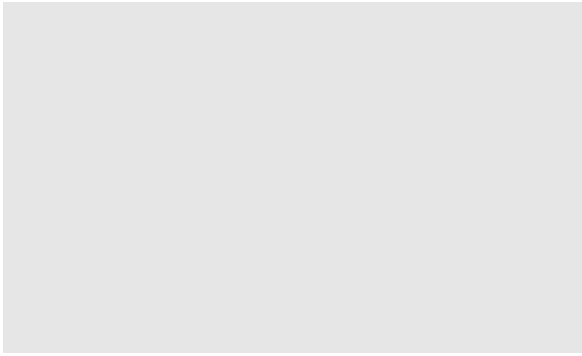


Evan Patton claps along to music during an ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA) adaptive dance class.

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She concluded that dance was a uniquely desired activity among those with disabilities, but there was a glaring lack of accessible programs in the Madison area.



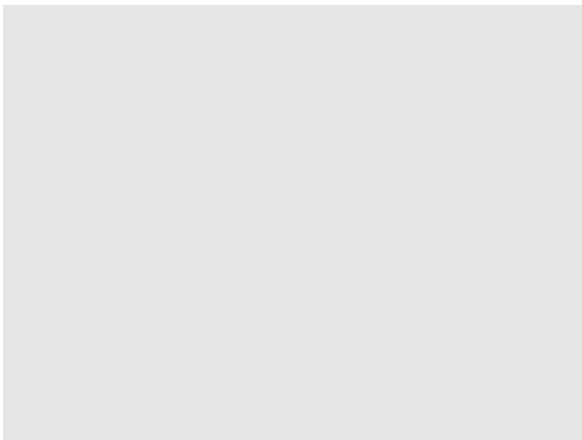


Martha Siravo, Elias Cook, Kim Falkenstein, Patricio Cierna (instructor) and Jasmine Siravo practice choreography during an adaptive dance class at MYArts.
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That's about to change. Martin-Wright now spends every Tuesday night on the floor of MYArts' dance studios watching teens and adults with various disabilities learn choreographed group dances from experienced instructors, swinging their arms, hips, and heads to the lyrics of Fatboy Slim and The Go-Go's.

A hip hop-focused teen class is offered at 5 p.m. An adult "Dance Fever" class follows at 7 p.m. and is also offered over Zoom.

"It's a fun class," said Kathryn Woods, an adult dance class student and accomplished musician whose visual impairment has not stopped her from performing with local bands like Glacial Drifters and Cajun Strangers.



Kathryn Woods (in the striped top) smiles while dancing during an ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA) adaptive dance class.
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"I really enjoy meeting all sorts of interesting people," Woods added. "I used to live on a farm and felt pretty isolated, so I'm always looking for chances to be social."

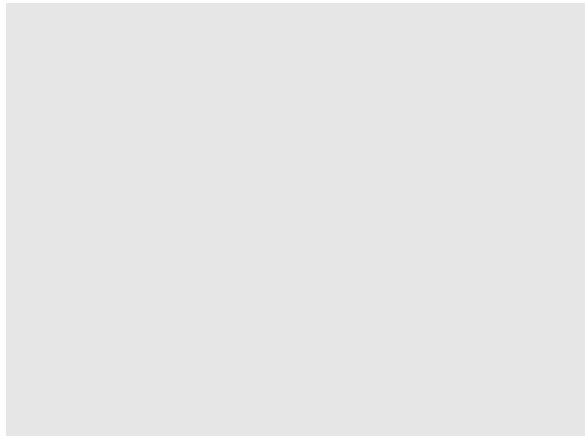
Collaborating with partners such as UW-Madison, Madison Ballet, Wheels & Heels, Barrio Dance, NewBridge and Cycropia Aerial Dance, the program seeks to create a supportive environment where disabled individuals can explore movement, express themselves creatively, and build meaningful connections with their peers.

Wheels & Heels founder Martha Siravo attends the teen class with her daughter Jasmine (Jaz) Siravo. Jaz has cerebral palsy and epilepsy.

“As a parent, you’re constantly doing stuff with your child and making sure that they’re safe,” said Siravo, former Ms. Wheelchair Wisconsin and bronze-level pair dancer at Fred Astaire Dance Studios. Siravo suffered a spinal injury and loss in movement in her left hand.

“I love it when we find spaces where we don’t have to be the person that’s right next to them, and they’re still able to explore and be safe and have fun in what they’re doing,” Siravo said. “When you have a disability ... you have all your health challenges that tend to get in the way. You’re not sure if you are interested in something like dance, but you have to pull yourself in and just give it a try.”

Asked how she felt about the dance classes, teenage Jaz, too shy to share in words, simply smiled and wrapped her arms around the guest dance instructor from Barrio Dance, Patricio Cierna.

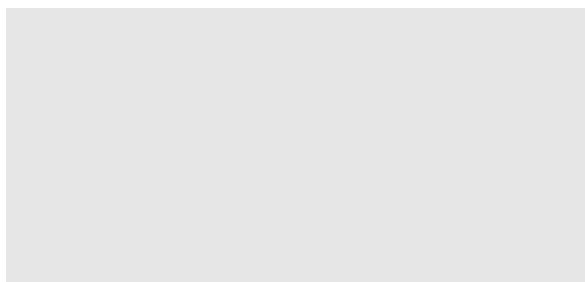


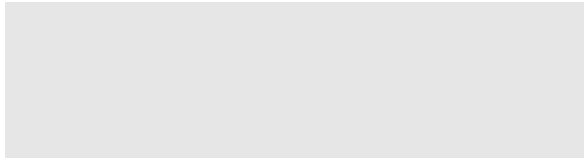
Patricio Cierna leads an adaptive dance class at Madison Youth Arts.
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“When you’re in my class, we’re having fun, and we’re doing it together,” said Cierna, who has performed on stage, for music videos, and worked for Netflix on shows like “El Marginal.”

“On those big productions, everyone’s professional but there’s not a lot of patience,” Cierna said. “I had fun (but) there was so much pressure. I didn’t dance for three years and I thought I was done. Then I got here and I discovered that I love working with kids. I don’t want to make any kid feel the things I felt (that) made me want to stop dancing.”

According to the students, Cierna appears to be accomplishing his goal.





Martha Siravo (left), Luv Joy Seamon (middle), Elias Cook (right), Kim Falkenstein (red top) and Jasmine Siravo (pink top) participate in an adaptive dance class lead by Patricio Cierna at Madison Youth Arts.

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“I felt comfortable very quickly,” said 15-year-old Elias Cook, who is on the autism spectrum and works on both his dance moves and his Spanish with Argentina-born Cierna. “It was very fun to me.”

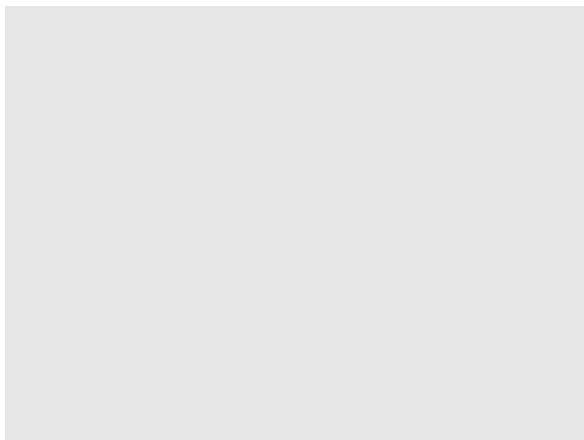
Martin-Wright looked at Elias. “When you first came with your mom, I remember you walked in with a scowl on your face,” she said. “You were not excited to be here at all.”

“But that changed,” Elias said. “It turned out to be a good time after all.”

Ready to fly

Teen and adult classes are the first building blocks for the initiative’s bigger moves. ARTS for ALL is putting together a series of free workshops that will be open to the public and allow teachers, students and anyone else interested to learn about the best practices in the field of adaptive dance from experts in the field.

These include four-time Paralympic medalist Cheryl Angelelli, co-founder of Dance Mobility. She will be teaching AFA’s first adaptive dance workshop class on Saturday, April 13, from 12-1:30 p.m. at MYArts.



Kim Falkenstein and Martha Siravo practice choreography during an ARTS for ALL Wisconsin (AFA) adaptive dance class at Madison Youth Arts.

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That class will focus on Latin dance techniques for people who use wheelchairs with standing partners. Participants will get the opportunity to use a sports wheelchair themselves.

“We’re actively hiring for dance teachers right now and we want to make sure that they have best-practice training as part of their relationship with ARTS for ALL,” said Martin-Wright. “Going forward we’ll be adding more dance classes and (incorporating) dance into our visual art and music classes that we already offer in Madison.”

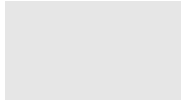
ARTS for ALL intends to host recitals and social dances for people of all ages and offer aerial dances taught by Luv Joy Seamon at Cycropia Aerial Dance.

“This is a dream project for me,” said Martin-Wright. “We want to make sure there is always a safe and fun place to practice these skills and to meet other people who want to dance.”

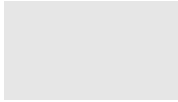
Editor's note: This story has been updated to clarify the history of ARTS for ALL.

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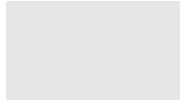
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