

GESU SCHOOL STUDENTS KICK UP THEIR HEELS FOR “MAD HOT BALLROOM”

5th and 6th graders get ready to begin new ballroom dance classes at Gesu School – the region’s only school to offer such classes to this age group

PHILADELPHIA (September 2005) – There may be no chandeliers on the ceiling or fancy parquet on the floor, but 5th and 6th graders at Gesu School will nonetheless feel the grandeur and elegance of ballroom dancing when they begin a 10-week class in the spirit of the New York dance program profiled in the recent acclaimed documentary “Mad Hot Ballroom.”

Gesu, a nationally renowned independent Catholic elementary school serving 430 pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students, is the region’s only school offering such a program to this age group. Classes for 50 5th graders will begin next week in the school’s basement as Gesu prepares its “ballroom” – an enclosed rooftop gymnasium being constructed as part of the extensive renovations funded by its “Building for Tomorrow” campaign.

Gesu leaders say the new “Mad Hot Ballroom” class, which is being taught by certified dance instructor Samantha Bellomo of the Arthur Murray Studio in Paoli, is about much more than learning to tango, swing and fox trot or preparing for competition. By exposing its inner-city students – most of whom struggle with the ravages of poverty, drugs and violence on a daily basis – to the beauty, precision and creativity of ballroom dancing, Gesu will open up a host of new experiences whose impact can be as transformative as that shown in the film.

“Like so many of our other enrichment programs that supplement our academic curriculum, these dance lessons will address the needs of the whole child in ways that go much deeper than just developing a new skill,” says Christine S. Beck, president of Gesu School. “We hope the children will learn about themselves and each other while seeing see new possibilities in the world around them.”

The school is prepared for the inevitable challenges such a program presents. Boys and girls must avoid snubbing their noses at their classmates and be willing to hold hands, make eye contact and be polite while learning the social graces and form of the dance. But in the end, school leaders are certain most students will ultimately enjoy the challenge and have fun while developing lifelong skills.

Beginning September 26, the 5th grade dance classes will be held each Monday (except October 31), with half of the students having lessons from 10:00 to 10:45 a.m. and the other half from 10:45 to 11:30 a.m. A fun competition is scheduled for the last day. The 6th grade classes will start in January.

The new course is just one of several innovative arts programs instituted at Gesu, which offered a Barnes Foundation arts education program last year and will be participating this year in The Philadelphia Orchestra’s School Partnership Program. These types of programs supplement the school’s comprehensive educational approach, which features pre-kindergarten classes, a resource room, single-gender classes in grades three through five, intensive literacy programs, counseling, peer mediation, mentoring and after-school programs.