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Dancing "birds" get a workout

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Hannah Bontrager (center) of Ballet Fantastique has led four half-hour sessions at Moffitt Elementary in Springfield during the past two weeks. Before that, she spent two weeks at Eugene's Harris Elementary.

SPRINGFIELD - With her lithe, muscular dancer's body, Hannah Bontrager made the "bird dance" look effortless, perching on one leg with arms outstretched before bounding across the Moffitt Elementary School gymnasium in simulated flight Tuesday afternoon.

But for many of the two-dozen fledglings following behind her, it wasn't so easy. They puffed and they panted, and a few were flushed by the time she let them rest.

"Are you working hard yet?" she asked the children, all of them second-graders in Nancy Wing's class at Moffitt. "Did you know real dancers do work very hard?"

For many of the children, Bontrager is the first ballet dancer they'd ever seen, and she was clearly an inspiration.

"It's kind of fun - I'm thinking about doing it," said 8-year-old Badger Kimbl, one of several boys in the class who seemed well beyond any notion that ballet is just for girls.

Bontrager, executive director of the Eugene-based Ballet Fantastique, has led four half-hour sessions at Moffitt during the past two weeks, concluding a grant-funded pilot project called Experience Dance. Before that, she spent two weeks at Harris Elementary in Eugene working with music teacher David Adee.

The project was funded through a \$1,200 grant paid for through the city of Eugene Cultural Services Division and administered by the Lane Arts Council. The grant also paid for 500 children to see a Ballet Fantastique performance of the "Cakewalk Ballet" at the Shedd.

"We're bringing dance into the schools and kids into the theater," said Bontrager, 23.

Bontrager said she hopes to gain support to continue and expand the project, which is designed to introduce children to ballet and explore academic subjects - at Moffitt, birds, which has been a unit of study in Wing's class this spring - through dance and movement. The project is also the subject of Bontrager's undergraduate thesis at the University of Oregon, where she's in the Honors College.

She noted what has been painfully obvious to many local parents and children in recent years: That the arts have largely been squeezed out of the elementary school curriculum, partly because of budget constraints but also due to a stepped-up focus on standardized testing.

While Bontrager said all children benefit from exposure to the arts, programs such as hers have an even greater impact at schools such as Moffitt and Harris, which serve comparatively high percentages of disadvantaged children.

"It's certainly amazing to come in here and work with kids who haven't had a chance to do this before," she said.

Bontrager - "Ms. Hannah" to the Moffitt students - began Tuesday's session by passing around toe shoes for every child to examine, urging them to tap the ends against the gym floor to get a feel for how they work. Then she demonstrated, eliciting a "Wow!" from one wide-eyed girl.

A lifelong dancer and 2002 graduate of South Eugene High School, Bontrager studied at the prestigious Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington, D.C., and danced professionally with the Denver-based Colorado Ballet for one season before returning to Eugene in 2003. Three years earlier, she and her mother, Donna Bontrager,

launched Ballet Fantastique, a training academy and chamber ballet company that strives to offer a classic training experience to young dancers of all backgrounds and means.

While still a professional dancer, Bontrager said she hopes to continue teaching and become an arts program administrator or outreach coordinator.

"I just feel like I can touch more lives in a direct way," she said.

Bontrager packed a lot into Tuesday's half-hour, leading the children through a variety of movements, all the while introducing them to new vocabulary such as "allegro," "adagio" and "kinesphere" - the personal space around a dancer, or, as she told them, a bird in flight.

While Badger had only ever seen ballet on television, classmate Eden Wilde had taken lessons before - albeit for only a week.

"It's fun," said Eden, demonstrating some of her new moves after the session. "Especially because it gets you all kind of relaxed and excited about dance."

Wing said working with Bontrager has been a joy for her and the students. She recalled hearing a couple of boys grumble on the way to the gym the first day that they would never do ballet, but they quickly warmed up to it.

"I could go on and on about (Bontrager) - she's so wonderful," Wing said.

"She has incorporated not only doing just movement around birds, but she's using vocabulary, demonstrating different concepts with birds. She's been talking about a bird's habitat and what they eat and how they fly."

Many of her students, she said, "are trying to run out to the store and buy ballet shoes."