

Exposure to arts at young age helps build character

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For Julie Clemons' 5-year-old daughter, Belle, all it took to fall in love with dancing was her first glimpse into a dance studio.

"The minute she saw all the mirrors, that was it," Clemons said. "I've had people tell me that she was born for the stage, and being able to watch herself dance just sealed the deal for her."

That was about two years ago, when Belle was 3 years old.

"She had all this energy," Clemons said. "And, to be honest, she wasn't the most graceful child. So I thought it would be good to do something that would teach her a little grace. Still, I was a little surprised at how quickly she took to learning to dance."

A great many youngsters get their start in the arts at a young age.

Some of them are prodigies such as Mozart, who had mastered the piano and violin at age 4 and was composing at age 5.

Numerous studies have shown that participating in the arts - especially those art forms that rely on collaboration with others - has benefits beyond simply learning to play an instrument or how to apply paint to a canvas or appearing in a dance recital.

The arts can help instill self-discipline, sharpen problem-solving skills and show how to work together with others.

But the majority are youngsters who - either on their own initiative or at the encouraging of their parents - take up music or singing or dance +simply for the fun of it. And that, say local performing arts teachers, is an essential part of the process of making the arts a part of children's lives.

Ashlee Elmore, director of the Tulsa Children's Chorus, said, "(Our) chorus is meant to offer kids a high-caliber choral music experience, but if it's not fun, it's pointless."

The Tulsa Children's Chorus has about 60 singers this year, ranging in age from 8 to 18. The group performs concerts on its own and in collaboration with other arts organizations, such as Tulsa Opera and the Tulsa Symphony Orchestra.

Kara Ritchie, who owns That's Dancing, the studio where Belle Clemons first saw all those mirrors, said, "No one is going to keep doing something they aren't enjoying. Of course we want to teach our students the proper technique for dance, but our focus is more on the recreational."

Organizations such as the Tulsa Ballet Center for Dance Education and the bART Center for Music (formerly the Barthelmes Conservatory) offer programs for young performers that could lead to a performing career.

But these groups also have programs for those who are looking for good instruction but are not wanting to make a big commitment.

"Yes, we have a pre-professional program, that could ultimately take a student to the professional main company," said Stacey Jenkins, director of education and outreach at Tulsa Ballet. "But we also have what we call the Open division, which is a low-commitment, one-day-a-week program."

Like many dance programs, Tulsa Ballet's school will take students as young as 3 years old.

"With the very young, we want to get them used to a classroom setting, where they can learn to be part of a group, and to listen to and take direction from someone other than Mom," Jenkins said.

Deborah Bright, the interim director of the bART Center, said, "When it comes to strict classical training, we prefer our students be at least 6 years old. Ours is a pretty rigorous program and is only for a certain type of child and a certain type of family willing to support this.

"But we also offer Suzuki training in flute and violin, and that can begin as early as 3," she said. "Children have an aptitude for music at birth, and it continues to ripen until about age 8. So those are crucial years to cultivate that aptitude in these early years, and to do it ways that is fun for the child."

Elmore said she understands how exposure to the arts can change one's life.

"I knew by the age of 12, because of my being exposed to organizations like the Tulsa Children's Chorus, that I wanted to be a choral director," she said. But she also knows that the arts can do even more.

"There's new research out that states, after acclimating to the chorus members around them, children's heartbeats can begin to sync during choral rehearsals," she said. "The research also shows that children who participate in choruses receive the same stress-relieving benefits that their parents do during yoga."

All say parents can help encourage their child's interest in the arts beyond paying the fees for classes and providing transportation.

"I think it's very helpful for parents to provide a variety of arts activities for their children to experience," Jenkins said. "Going to live performances, for example, is so important. But even if your child is interested in dance, it's good also to introduce them to music, to painting, and see what captures them. It's all about encouraging kids to think creatively in all aspects of life."