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'Miss Leesha' gets kids moving

De Pere owner builds a following with interactive classes

*By Todd McMahon
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Perhaps more than ever, 'tis the season when children are susceptible to all sorts of sickness.

Leesha Rieder in her job comes into contact with dozens of kids every week. She is preparing herself for the onslaught of coughing, runny noses, scratchy throats and upset stomachs the next few months.

"Lots of vitamins," Rieder said. "I keep my hands washed. I am getting a flu shot this year, and I've never had that before."

She also has another defense mechanism for coping with the blahs of fall and winter, a feel-good cure for the common cold and other proverbial bugs that might be gnawing at someone.

It's called Kids On The Move.

Befitting its name, the cheerful Rieder leaves no enjoyable moment under wraps for the young participants in her performing arts program.

"Very fun," said Alex Yedica, a 7-year-old girl from Suamico who has been involved with Kids On The Move since Rieder founded it five years ago.

About 200 children, ages 2½ to 13, are enrolled in Kids On The Move programming that coincides with the school year, from September to May.

Rieder and assistant Julie Kocken, both of De Pere, make the rounds in Northeastern Wisconsin five days a week.

They offer Kids On The Move classes during the day at 20 day cares and preschools, extending from Oconto Falls to the north to Appleton to the south.

Classes also are held on Tuesday and Thursday nights at Four Seasons Tennis Club in Allouez.

The monthly fee for a class, which meets once a week for 45 minutes to an hour, is \$34. Participants make an eight-month commitment to Kids On The Move.

"I try to make the program a great experience for the kids and for parents to not feel that they're nickel-and-dimed," Rieder said. "I think that's really important for parents to know that this is what you're paying and they have that right up front."

Rieder, 37, started her own business after she had coordinated the dance program at YWCA Green Bay-De Pere for 11 years.

Her initial turnout for Kids On The Move was about 75 children, some of whom Rieder worked with at the YWCA.

The majority of her classes concentrate on dance, and Rieder has a strong conviction about how her operation through its philosophy is set apart from other dance- and performance-oriented programs and studios in the region.

"You can bring your child to a dance class and they stand on a spot and they shuffle their feet and they learn all kinds of dance terminology and they're bored out of their mind and you're paying a lot more than you're paying with us," Rieder said.

While children in her dance classes are given to wearing attire such as leotards and ballet and tap shoes, Rieder isn't in the business of training prospective "Dancing with the Stars"-caliber performers for 15 years down the road.

"I have found a niche, I think, that is unique to the area, when you offer a class that is very imaginary, teaches them physical movement and mental movement," said Rieder, who is affectionately called "Miss Leesha" by the children.

"When you can put that all in the one class, it makes for a really good class," she added. "Look at their faces, of the little kids — to see them light up."

Whether it's dance, theatre arts or children's choir, Rieder and Kocken get their participants engaged in age-appropriate activities that have them constantly moving and often thinking.

One popular activity for the young kids in the dance classes is to hop over witches hats and yell "Wake up!" with a prompt from the instructor that they're to imagine that the witches are asleep on the ground.

Laurie Laurent-Hyland of Allouez has a daughter, Jacqie, 5, who came into the program struggling with physical coordination but has improved since being in the dance classes for two years.

"Leesha and Julie are very good with working with kids who may not be the best dancers," Laurent-Hyland said. "Some of the other programs are very dance competitive. We want her to get the exercise and have fun. It's more for getting them moving."

Another diversion is having the seated children close their eyes and imagine that they're painting. The paint is on the floor, and the canvas is in front of them. So, they get their arms moving from the floor out to the imaginary canvas.

Participants also learn about the different muscles in the body as they go through different movements and are taught proper posture — the goal is to be "Straighto Greato," not "Sloucho Groucho."

"You're great because you're sitting up tall," Rieder tells the children.

"One, they like it, and two, what I think they get out of it is with the instructors they have, I think they're kind of building the confidence in my kids. I can see that," Geno McKenna of Allouez said.

McKenna and wife Sara have put their two oldest — daughters Molly, 9, and Elizabeth, 5 — of four children through Kids On The Move for several years.

Rieder's background is in performing arts. She started dancing when she was 5, and her home away from home growing up in Southern California was a dance studio owned and operated by her mother, Dee Dee Kaplan.

Rieder, a fourth-generation dancer in her family, continues to satisfy her appetite for being on stage by performing with local theater groups. She was in "The Producers" at St. Norbert College in the summer.

Her first love is her family, however. She has two daughters, and oldest child Michaela, 14, has been an inspiration for Rieder to reach out to children of special needs and provide equal opportunity for them in Kids On The Move.

Michaela, who attends Syble Hopp School in De Pere, has autism.

"I think every parent that has a special-needs child and the child should experience having the child in programming," Rieder said. "Every child should get the chance to do what we do."

More than a dozen children with physical and mental disabilities are in Kids On The Move.

Vicki Lind of De Pere has seen the benefits for her 10-year-old daughter Claira, who has dyslexia, by participating in the dance classes.

"She's tapping (on her own) in the morning, and she's tapping after school," Lind said. "It's really done a lot for her self-esteem."

Cindy Allcox of Bellevue echoed the sentiment.

Her 11-year-old daughter Bethany has Down syndrome and has been accepted by the other children in her dance class.

"Leesha has just welcomed her with open arms," Allcox said. "It's a non-competitive program. It's really enhanced her coordination. It's helped with her social interactions with peers that don't have disabilities. The kids here see her as a friend. They help her out."

Rieder and husband Jerry, who manages the business side of Kids On The Move, are looking to expand the evening classes to the Appleton area in the next year.

Spots are still open for classes this school year.

For information, call (920) 366-5565 or go to www.kidsonthemovewi.com.

Time Out with ...

Leesha Rieder

- Age: 37
 - Residence: De Pere
 - Family: Husband, Jerry; two daughters, one stepdaughter and one stepson
 - Hobbies: Scrapbooking, acting, singing, dancing, volunteering with animals
 - On teaching, motivating and inspiring children through her Kids On The Move program: "I'm living in happy land. The eyes, when those kids look at you in the eye and are smiling and singing, you can't get a better job."
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