

## Stuck in a hula hoop

How children's ballet schools reopened their doors for in-person classes

By: Kamy Smelser

“Can you blow up your bubble for me?” Misha Woodward asks her 2-year-old ballet students. “That's our special bubble; we don't want to pop our friends' bubbles. We've got to keep them extra safe.”

These ballet students dressed in their poofy tutus, perfect ballerina buns and face masks sit criss-crossed on their pink polka-dot taped to the floor that's designed to keep them six feet from other students.

Ms. Misha, as her ballerinas call her, sits on the opposite side of the lavender and bubblegum pink colored room as she directs her students to stretch out as they prepare an imaginary pizza.

Ballet schools across Chicago such as Woodward's school, TuTu School Chicago, have had their doors open for in-person classes since June 2020, but it has been no easy task when preparing an intriguing curriculum that will keep her students interested while being aware of the ongoing pandemic.

“We are doing our best,” Woodward says as she sanitizes the ballerinas' crayons. “The biggest challenge is kind of mitigating kids from wanting to grasp each other.”

Before entering the studio, each student and parent is asked to answer the usual Covid-19 symptom questions. After confirming that they are free from any sign of the virus, Woodward stands at the front placing a thermometer on each forehead.

Stay-at-home mom, Liza Batinich, watches the dancers during the 45-minute ballet lesson as her 2-year-old leaps to and from the polka-dots placed across her “driving-lane.”

“They've absolutely done a great job at keeping everyone safe,” Batinich said. These in-person classes have gotten them out of the house and given her ballerina a chance to be around other kids.

Batinich, like many parents, had to become creative in how they entertained their child after the initial shut-down. Whether that was a trip to Target or taking a walk outside, Batinich would give her only child things to do so she wasn't clinging to a screen which Batinich says she would get bored of quickly.

“It’s good to be out of the house again,” Batinich said. “She does better when she is out of the house and she can sleep better at night and throws less temper tantrums.”

A FairyTale Ballet School has also had their doors open since this past July, holding in-person classes, private and semi-private classes for ages 18 months through K-12 students.

Like most schools across Chicago, FairyTale Ballet took an early spring break when the shutdown was put into effect back in March and then continued with virtual classes. To make things interesting for their students, they even conducted a virtual performance of “The Nutcracker.”

“The kids loved it,” Christina Morrison, a teacher at A FairyTale Ballet said. “It felt like a performance. It’s weird, but they have something special, something different to cherish and the final footage is mostly bad, but for their parents to have an up-close video that they can keep, it’s actually kind of nice and it does make you rethink performance in general.”

Now that students can come back together in-person, capacity limits and social distancing are at the forefront of keeping these ballet schools safe. Both TuTu School Chicago and FairyTale Ballet keep less than 10 people in their studios at one time and are having to teach the younger students how to keep from touching one another. While this is the first time many of these students have had to listen to someone other than their parents after almost a year of being stuck at home.

“You know the babies are babies, and especially for the two-year-olds, half their life has been this,” Morrison said. “They don’t understand that structure of daycare since they didn’t have that experience. They don’t necessarily understand that they should listen to a teacher because the only person they’ve ever listened to is mom or dad.”

While being restricted to a procedure that prevents the spread of the virus, this new way of learning for students and teachers has provided some benefits for their classes.

“There’s been a lot more individual attention,” Woodward said. “So I’ve been able to correct things I normally wouldn’t catch because I’ve got like 12 other kids in my class and I can’t focus for example on Jennifer, having her feet turned, so now I’m able to see that.”

Teachers like Morrison and Woodward have had to come up with ways to make their ballet studios a fun and comfortable space like it was before the pandemic. Using tactics such as placing a hula hoop in the center of the room for students to use as a stage for solo performances.

“I think my main goal as a teacher, primarily, before I was concerned about really learning material and learning techniques and achieving certain steps, it became more of how we can make dance classes fun and engaging again, and a way for them to escape from all of this,” Morrison said.