



Mathew Cook, 12, pushes his grandmother Joan Hurd in her wheelchair as the two lead a conga line at the Kenwood Terrace Care Center. PHOTOS BY ADAM KIEFABER/THE ENQUIRER

Grandmother receives the gift of dance this Thanksgiving

By Adam Kiefaber
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Numerous medical problems have affected Joan Hurd's ability to talk and recognize her own family for the last 12 years.

It has not, however, affected her love for her grandson, Mathew, who was born with Down syndrome.

After being heavily sedated for seven days from a seizure she suffered on Oct. 7, the 85-year-old complained to nurses that she wasn't being allowed to see "him."

It took some time before the nurses and her daughter realized who "him" was.

And it wasn't so much that Hurd wanted to see him.

She wanted to see him dance.

Mary Ramirez-Cook, Hurd's daughter and Mathew's mother, has been a dance instructor for 25 years and created the Dancing Stars, or DS, a dance group devoted to providing free dance instruction to people with Down syndrome.

She created the program because she noticed that Mathew, 12, liked to dance and she thought it could be a good way for him (and for her) to meet others living with Down syndrome.

Since the group started meeting in 2007, it has grown to more than 40 members - all with Down syndrome - who dance together on Wednesdays at Ramirez-Cook's studio, A-Marika



Joan Hurd hugs her grandson, Mathew Cook, 12, who is a member of the Dancing Stars, a group devoted to providing free dance instruction to people with Down syndrome.

Dance Company in Sharonville.

"She asks me every day, 'When is he dancing?'" Ramirez-Cook said. "Her health was never well enough to come see them. I even tried to set up a show at a hotel near her old Downtown apartment."

But until Tuesday, Hurd had never seen him dance.

That was the day Ramirez-Cook was finally able to give her mother her wish when Mathew and 20 others performed for her and other residents of the Kenwood Terrace Care Center, where Hurd is recovering from a series of seizures and a fall that caused bleeding in her brain.

"She was so excited about this," Ramirez-Cook said. "She kept asking, 'What day is it again?'"

Mathew showed off his dance moves for his grandmother as she and other residents cheered. The performance was capped off with Mathew and his grandmother leading a conga line, him pushing her in her wheelchair.

"Every minute of it was a blessing," Hurd said after the show. "He is just so special."

Praising Mathew isn't uncommon for Hurd, who has 18 other grandchildren and has been known to share with complete strangers that he is her favorite.

"God knows that I love him the most," Hurd said. "I am so lucky."

Two years ago, Ramirez-Cook had a problem with Mathew running away. So she had a book made with photos of family members that he could trust. It also featured a story that showed why he had to be careful around strangers.

Recently, Mathew brought the book to show his grandmother at the care center. With the book, Mathew helped her to recognize the once-familiar faces.

"I can't even describe how special their relationship is," Ramirez-Cook said. "It is just amazing to see them together."

"I am just so thankful, as her daughter, that I can give her this gift at Thanksgiving." ■

ABOUT A-MARIKA DANCE COMPANY

- » **Mission:** Teaches dance and social skills to people living with Down syndrome
- » **Created:** 2007
- » **Became nonprofit:** 2012
- » **Classes:** Wednesdays (except last Wednesday of the month)
- » **Donations:** Cover cost of T-shirts, shoes and costumes for competitions and events
- » **Donate:** Call 513-769-0409 (all donations are tax-deductible)
- » **Website:** www.a-marika.com

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