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SECTION B » MONDAY, JUNE 24, 2013



Cincinnati Zoo doctor plays role in birth of rare rhino

[Page B5]



The power of DANCE

Unique class for those with Down syndrome teaches more than just footwork [Page B4]

Members of the A-Marika Dance Company in Sharonville perform during the company's "Dancing With Our Stars" fundraiser on June 9 at the Grove Banquet Center. The nonprofit company was created in 2007 by Mary Ramirez-Cook, whose son has Down syndrome, and is funded completely by donations. THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON

CONTINUED NEXT PAGE

City Council to decide streetcar fate today

By Jane Prendergast
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Cincinnatians could learn today whether the city will move forward with its streetcar project.

City Council is set to vote on the project's \$17.4 million cost overrun at its budget committee meeting at 1 p.m. All nine members of council sit on the committee.

Council members have a new in-

centive - federal officials on Friday promised \$5 million more for the now \$133 million project, up from the initial \$110 million estimate. A condition for getting the money from the U.S. Department of Transportation is approval of the \$17.4 million.

The money is needed to cover the gap between what the city expected construction to cost - \$44.6 million - and the almost \$71 million bid by Messer Construction. City Manager

Milton Dohoney told council members last month that, if they don't approve the extra money, the project is essentially dead.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said the \$5 million also is dependent on restoring things reduced as cost-saving measures, including building walls around the power substations and restoring a passenger information system.

City officials acknowledge they

don't yet know how much the project might ultimately cost because the low bid from Messer has expired.

The company still wants to do the project, but Dohoney said he won't know how much that bid rises until he starts negotiations with Messer. But he can't really start those talks until he knows council's committed to cover the \$17.4 million, he says.

The committee will meet in council chambers at City Hall. ■

COVER STORY



FANCY FEET

Watch some of the A-Marika Dance Stars at Cincinnati.com.



Robbie Knodle of Symmes Twp. and a member of the A-Marika Dance Company dances with a friend during the studio's June 9 fundraiser. THE ENQUIRER/AMANDA DAVIDSON

Studio helps to develop social skills

Nonprofit company is the only one of its kind in the region, and 'the families just absolutely love it'

By Adam Kiefaber
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SHARONVILLE — Annie Mullin can't wait for Wednesdays.

Wednesday is dance night. The 60-year-old never had much of a social life, living with her parents until they passed away five years ago, then living with her sister.

However, on Wednesdays she lets loose with more than 40 others who live with Down syndrome and participates in a dance class at A-Marika Dance Company in Sharonville.

"For the two years that we have been here, it has been unbelievable in the changes in her personality. She is now more outgoing," said Barbara McBride, Mullin's sister. "When you tell her it's dance night, she can't get changed fast enough."

Studio owner Mary Ramirez-Cook, who started dancing when she was 3 and has been instructing for 25 years, admits her motive in creating the program was selfish. She knew her son, Mathew, 12, who has Down syndrome, enjoyed dancing.

The result was anything but selfish, as her organization grew from five to more than 40 students — with a waiting list.

"I just wanted to see my son in-

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:** a-marika.com

cluded in everything that other children are included in," Ramirez-Cook said. "But it turned out to help so many others in that it doesn't just teach them to dance, but it also has really helped their social skills."

Not only did the class touch the teacher and other families who live with Down syndrome, it also struck a chord with her other adult students, many of whom volunteer to share what they have learned on the dance floor.

"When I walk in, I have had a long day. It is close to 6 o'clock and then the dancers are saying 'hello' to you, you are getting hugs and you sort of drift into this world that is separate from all the day-to-day problems," said Leonard Mark of West Chester, a volunteer with the class since 2008.

"For one hour, you really get a chance to focus on something that's really important."

The class, A-Marika (pronounced America) Dance Stars, or DS, is taught by Ramirez-Cook. Yes, the free class provides instruction, but it also offers other invaluable benefits to its students and their families.

"Mary has wings and a halo," said McBride, of Springfield Township. "I don't think that too many people know that something like this goes on, but it is so worthwhile. And we are so grateful for it."

On the night of a recent class, students filled the entire dance hall while loved ones surrounded them in a line of chairs. Positive energy filled the studio and moved its guests to cry, to laugh and, most frequently, to cheer.

"It's fun and it helps promote a healthy lifestyle," said Jim Hudson, executive director of the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati. "The families just absolutely love it and look forward to going every Wednesday."

Hudson said the program, which began in 2007, is the only dance club for adults with Down syndrome in the region. Julie Cevallos, vice president of marketing of the National Down Syndrome Society, said such a club is rare.

As with the dancers, Wednesdays hold a special place in Mark's heart. He admits it is the only day a week that he makes sure nothing else is on his calendar. When he retires in a year from his job as a Miami University professor, he wants to create an A-Marika DS in Washington, D.C.

"It has given me direction in that I want to devote a substantial part of my life to making a difference in people's lives," he said.

"That is what Mary has done. She has given these dancers a lot of joy. She is remarkable. There are only a few people in the world who I respect as much as Mary." ■

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