

Teen Ambassador Program Seeking Students to Promote the Arts

BY K. DENISE JENNINGS, Special to The Daily News

Ballet on Wheels, a traveling dance program that has taken dance training into Shelby County Schools and other community organizations, has always had a mission to serve young people of diverse backgrounds, but now the organization is expanding beyond just dance training and mentoring local students who want to become leaders for the next generation in its new Teen Ambassador Program.

Ballet on Wheels is a pre-professional, community-based classical ballet company that strives to teach its students the fundamentals of dance, self-discipline, perseverance and creativity, said [Karen Williams](#), manager of marketing and community outreach for the organization.

“We see the Teen Ambassador Program as an extension of that for students who aren’t necessarily interested in being dancers, but who recognize the importance of the arts in education and want to develop many of the same skills involved in performance arts.”

Chauniece Thompson, founder and executive director of Ballet on Wheels Dance School & Company, [1015 S. Cooper St.](#), agrees.

“When a student takes on learning any type of arts discipline it builds other disciplines like organization and time management that help them become more successful when they leave for college,” Thompson said. “They have to juggle school, class, rehearsals and performances. They’re busy, and that requires time management. If they learn to dance that’s great, but if they learn to be better people who are more organized, that’s even better. It really makes for a more well-rounded student.”

Thompson, who started Ballet on Wheels in 2002 after a career as a professional dancer, is passionate about bringing arts education to children of all backgrounds. She believes the new Teen Ambassador Program (TAP) is another way to engage other types of students.

“Community service is a big component of our dance school in general, but we’ve been seeing mainly the types of students who dance, and we’re looking to engage students who are interested in community service,” said Thompson.

TAP, which will launch at the beginning of November and run until late April, is open to Shelby County students ages 15-18 who are service-oriented and interested in developing leadership skills in community-oriented fields like nonprofits and communications.

“We’re looking for 15-20 high school students interested in leadership and community development opportunities,” Williams said.

Anyone interested is encouraged to go to www.balletonwheels.org and fill out an application. The deadline for applying is Oct. 28, and the inaugural program class will be decided the following week, said Williams.



Ballet on Wheels Dance School & Company school operations manager Stephanie Hill, left, founder and executive artistic director Chauniece Thompson, and marketing director Jennifer Sharp.

(Daily News/Andrew J. Breig)

Participants in TAP will meet six to eight times during the school year and work on three to four service projects throughout that time. Local professionals in the nonprofit, community service and communications sectors will be invited to come and speak to the students at monthly meetings on a variety of topics, and mentoring will be available to program participants. TAP has been distinguished as a certified organization by the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is administered by the federal program Points of Light.

In addition to recruiting students, TAP is looking for professionals to come and speak to the students from a range of industries like accounting, the music industry, graphic design and advertising.

“We want to expose the students in the program to different points of view from a variety of market sectors,” Thompson said.

Currently, the program does not have a separate funding source other than the administrative budget of Ballet on Wheels.

“A lot of what we’re doing is special events and community-service related, so there’s not a lot of funding required to do what we want to do this year,” said Williams. “Since it’s the inaugural program, there will be a learning curve for us and we will be looking for feedback from the students. Our main goal is to inspire the next generation of leaders by exposing them to the value and transformative power of the arts. And practically, we’re hoping to offer real-world mentoring on topics like social media, technology, marketing and communication skills.”