

# Thinking Out Loud

## In Pursuit of Excellence

By Kim Yarborough

“Excellence.” I’ve come face-to-face with this word and its true meaning in recent weeks and it’s made me a better person. Well, I’m working on it, anyway! For the theme of the upcoming year-end performance at my school, Step Ahead Dance Studio in Garner, North Carolina, I chose the U.S. military. As my staff and I began brainstorming ideas for the season and the show, we came up with a lot of similarities between dance training and the military. I know, it sounds ludicrous. What could fluffy pink tutus and camouflage fatigues possibly have in common, not to mention pointe shoes and combat boots? Bear with me.

As dance teachers, we train our students to be disciplined, strong in body and spirit. We encourage, even demand, dedication to the art we are so passionate about because we know that dedication and commitment are vital to achieving our goals. We push our students to be the best they can be through hours of classes and rehearsals, so that when they take the stage, what they do has become second nature. There is no thought involved, only the beauty of motion that comes from the heart.

Our country’s military personnel are trained much the same way. Because they are required to be in top condition, they endure rigorous physical training. They are dedicated to their service and their country, and once they are on the field of battle, all the training takes a back seat. They go through the motions that have become second nature and they act from valiant hearts full of concern for their countrymen and fellow soldiers.

In keeping with our theme for the season, our studio has adopted a

squadron of airmen in an effort we call “Operation: Encourage!” We are communicating with active duty military personnel, sending cards, well wishes, and gifts to show our support for their efforts to preserve our freedom on a daily basis. We were invited to tour Pope Air Force Base in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and meet some of the airmen. What an amazing experience! On our tour we came face-to-face and

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heart-to-heart with excellence in its purest sense. The airmen exceeded all expectations for our visit and exhibited the high caliber of character that is prevalent in our military.

The students, their parents, several teachers, and I caravanned to the base, where we learned about the soldiers in “our” squadron and their jobs. Our students were full of questions for the airmen, whose patience never ran out. We visited the training course, sat in-

side a Humvee, and explored the inside of a C-130 airplane used for training purposes. We were told of soldiers who, though they were badly injured, wanted to know when they could return to their buddies in the field. How humbling it was to hear those stories.

At the end of the day, the airmen asked the students to line up and then presented each one with a small American flag, a photo of the squadron next to a C-130, and a Challenge coin, a coveted military prize. I received a shadow box containing the patches of the squadron, two Challenge coins, and a folded American flag that had recently flown on a combat mission in Iraq. We were all moved to tears as the flag was presented; it now hangs in a place of honor inside the studio.

That trip increased my own motivation to be the best individual that it’s in my power to be. And as a dance teacher, I hope to build that same kind of character in my students. I want them to show excellence in everything they do, both inside and outside of the studio.

We had hoped to be a source of encouragement to the airmen and show our support of their efforts in ensuring our freedom. However, we are the ones who have been most blessed so far. Our relationship with the squadron has renewed our commitment to strive to do our best and to expect the best from our students. We have learned what true excellence is all about.

*We welcome submissions of personal essays and opinion pieces. Send them to [Cheryl@rheegold.com](mailto:Cheryl@rheegold.com) or to Editor, Dance Studio Life, 10 South Washington St., Norton, MA 02766.*