A capital idea

Whipp uses dance as teaching tool

Judy Stanfield • Staff Writer

How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, according to the old joke.

How do you get to the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts? Ask Cissy Whipp. The UL Lafayette dance instructor is making a presentation on exploring the wetlands through movement at the Kennedy Center's annual Partners in Education conference for educators and artists. The four-day conference began Feb. 14 and runs through Feb. 18. Whipp has also been invited to join the Washington, D.C., performing arts møca's touring program.

"There are two or three other artists who are going to present at this convention," Whipp said. "One is a visual artist; one is a visual artist. Their thrust is finding ways to integrate the arts into the curriculum."

The center's 10-year-old Partners in Educators Program teams artists and dancers with educators and others from the community to find ways to introduce the arts into the classroom. Nationally there are 75 such teams. Since 1990, the local team has consisted of Whipp, Sandy Labbey of the Lafayette Parish Board School, Renee Roberts of the Acadiana Arts Council and Hector Lasalle, an assistant professor of architecture at UL Lafayette.

"The best way to teach children is through teachers," Roberts said. "People often go to their respective homes and teach their children how to integrate the arts into their lessons plans."

The idea goes beyond exposure to the arts. The arts become a teaching tool and in Acadiana, that art takes the form of dance.

"It isn't just a professional-level dance," Lasalle said. "It's how you use dance in the second grade to teach about butterflies."

The program may represent a more effective way to help children learn, Lasalle said. "We are all kinds of ways we learn," he said. "The school system targets only the student who is a verbal learner - the kind who can sit down and listen and listen for 30 minutes. But that's less than 30 percent of the students. Most need more movement."

"The idea of using movement as a way of teaching has already been put into practice locally," Whipp said. "They put it in the bodies. They really know it."

Acting assistant principal Juliana Thibeaux, who sits in on the sessions, said she has found the technique to be effective. "They are able to retain. When Whipp comes back for the "I have seen students in the sessions, who talk questions and they answer readily."

"The sessions have other benefits," Thibeaux said. "They are very creative in their movement. They have learned how to work together."

"The idea is not to replace traditional teaching methods, but to enhance them," she said. "And they have learned how to work together."

"We believe the arts are expressive vehicles. They allow us to touch other aspects of the student's lives."

"The students return to the conference each year to learn what other teams are doing across the country. Seven or eight years ago, Roberts, Labbey and Lasalle served as presenters at the conference."

"We bring our ideas to them and they share their ideas," Roberts said. "It's the best training ground. We know what's going on in Alaska, California and Maine."

"We take little pieces of their programs and mold them into projects that can work in our community."

A wetlands journey at Kennedy Center

The wetlands of Louisiana are places with a certain mystique. They are also the subject of environmental concern.

Maybe that's why Cissy Whipp's program that teaches the wetlands through movement appealed to the people at the Kennedy Center. Whipp was invited to present her program during the center's Partners in Education national conference, which is taking place right now in Washington, D.C.

She is teaching other educators in Education on the same topic. Whipp is one of the few people who explore the wetlands with students in hands-on classes. She uses the images of steps and bamboo poles. She is more like a play without words."

Whipp was commissioned by her fellow team members, Renee Roberts, Sandy Labbey and Hector Lasalle, to be the presentation."

The Abbeville native caught the attention of conference organizers. About six months ago, she presented her program at another workshop, a kind of dress rehearsal for the big event.

We ended up acting out some of the situations that threaten the environment, in Louisiana, its coastal erosion. People represent the island by being eroded away. Then, they had to problem-solve their way to help prevent coastal erosion and act out the situations."

"We are building beauty into some building, some planting salt-water rice. The rice grows in the water, too." Whipp said."

Whipp has made some adjustments to her presentation for the national conference. "For this reason, we have people from all over the country, we made it less geographically specific. We are inclusive, the natural world is part of the environment, and they get along the way."

"That's the best idea. We have people from every city in the country, and they're all over the place. We're going to look at several different ideas that threaten wetlands, from over-harvesting to pollution, erosion and development."

The team members from across the country who attend Whipp's workshop go home to pass on what they have learned to the teachers in their areas. The teachers, in turn, pass it on to their students.

"It helps to bring learning down to a personal level, according to Whipp. "We're all part of this experience, where they're acting out a specific plant or living organisms, and then the kids can copy it off the board, they haven't experienced any energy like it."

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