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10-year-old Patel Conservatory student provides shoes and lessons for children in need

Establishes program called Drew's Shoes

TAMPA, Fla. – Ten-year-old Drew Buckley has a compassionate spirit and kind heart. And, she loves taking ballet lessons at the Patel Conservatory at the David A. Straz Center for the Performing Arts in Tampa. So when Drew heard about underprivileged children dancing ballet in bare feet and socks, she leapt into action, ultimately raising over \$1,200 to purchase new ballet shoes for every student at Metropolitan Ministries Partnership School.

Each student attending this elementary school, a school devoted to children living in the homeless shelter and children living in the surrounding neighborhood, receives free ballet lessons. These ballet lessons are provided by the non-profit Patel Conservatory at the David A. Straz Center for the Performing Arts in Tampa, which offers off-site classes to under-served organizations as part of its arts education outreach. While the Conservatory covers the cost of its faculty's instruction time, neither the Conservatory, which operates at a \$1 million deficit annually, nor the public school can afford to purchase ballet slippers for the students.

Drew's mother, Deana Buckley, volunteers weekly by assisting Patel Conservatory dance instructor Ashley Hilton while she teaches ballet to young students at the Metropolitan Ministries Partnership School. A Patel Conservatory dance student herself, Deana told her budding ballerina daughter about the children she encountered who were thriving in the class, but lacking ballet slippers. Drew created a flyer, pounded on doors and emailed her contacts.

After collecting more than \$1,200, Deana placed the order for about 80 brand new shoes – black for boys and pink for girls. The Buckleys and Hilton sized the children's feet and when the shoes arrived, placed them on the feet of the thrilled young ballet students.

For most of these beaming children, they were receiving their first ever ballet shoes. For some, they were receiving their first pair of brand new shoes ever.

"Ballet is a wonderful art form to expose these children to, due to the discipline and focus that ballet requires. Ballet gives these students a creative outlet through which to express themselves, and they continue to improve their body alignment, coordination, strength, and flexibility," says dance instructor Ashley Hilton. "They are thrilled to have new ballet shoes, which will help in their journey to continue to grow as dancers."

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Drew also collected gently used ballet slippers, but most people preferred to donate cash. Many donors were former dancers who understood the exhilaration and dedication that comes from the art of dance.

Because children's feet grow quickly, and children who attend Metropolitan Ministries Partnership School tend to live more transient lifestyles than average children, the need for new ballet shoes continues. So today, to keep these children in shoes and to be able to offer them to new students entering the school, the Buckleys and the Patel Conservatory at the Straz Center have organized Drew's Shoes, a grass-roots fundraising drive that will provide vital funds to purchase additional ballet shoes and sustain the outreach program.

By visiting www.StrazCenter.org, it's easy to contribute to Drew's Shoes, and all donated money will be used to keep these students in ballet shoes and ensure that outreach programs like this one continue.

"These classes are such a gift to these kids. They are getting an introduction to ballet from professional instructors with impressive backgrounds and experience. They are expected to work hard in class and focus - and they do," said Deana Buckley. "In every class, I am amazed at the strength of these children. They have such innate joy; they just need to be given the opportunity to grow and the encouragement to succeed. The Patel Conservatory is offering that to this group of kids."

As part of the non-profit David A. Straz, Jr. Center for the Performing Arts, the Patel Conservatory, offers classes for children and adults of all experience levels in all kinds of dance, music and theater. More information is available by calling 813.222.1002 and by visiting www.patelconservatory.org.

PAC/PC 2010 – 19

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