

## St. Max Dance Krew lets students have fun and be themselves



**By Brock Weir**

Vanessa Lyn was just three years old when her parents forced her into dance and, when the curtain opened on her first performance, she remembers vividly crying on stage.

After getting off the stage, however, the first thing she wanted to do was get back on that stage and do it again. Thus, a love of dance was born.

Now a Grade 12 student at St. Maximilian Kolbe Catholic High School, it is a love she has tried to impart on her fellow students as one of the leaders of the St. Max Dance Krew, a fledgling group of dancers just looking to have some fun, find a sense of place, who have since become mainstays of school events.

The Dance Krew was something which had fallen by the wayside in recent years at St. Max. With a love of hip-hop, Vanessa approached Principal Dominic Scuglia with a vision of bringing it back. With a teacher-supervisor in place last year, it was then time to re-lay that groundwork.

"I loved how many kids came out and I saw in their faces so many people who never danced before and how much they enjoyed it from the start," says Vanessa. "Since then, I have wanted to teach dance and I just love seeing how much they enjoy it and when they get on stage and have gained the confidence that they didn't have before. It just warms my heart."

From those re-established beginnings, the group has grown from a small group of kids looking to cut loose after a hard day at school to a group which Vanessa says is now "everywhere", taking every opportunity within the school to bring their own brand of sunshine into the fore, including a recent Liturgical Dance performed as part of Catholic Education week.

As the lead choreographer, her first objective was to get her fellow students just to smile and let the music take them wherever they wanted to go.

"A lot of people just listen to music alone, dance in their bedrooms, and don't want to show anybody," she says. "Now, people can see them onstage and now they have fans in the crowd rooting them on just because of how many performances they have done. I know they have accomplished it now when I see them onstage how excited they are to come out to class again."

"When you're having a bad day, this is one thing you can look forward to and just let yourself go, look in the mirror and say, 'Hey, I look good dancing!'"

As a Grade 12 student, however, Vanessa's time as leader of the Dance Krew is drawing to a close as she prepares to head off to

university this fall to study business with an ultimate goal of opening up her own dance studio specializing in hip-hop. Waiting in the wings to take over as head choreographer is Grade 11 student Adam Barry, who got his first real taste of dance as a Krew member last year.

Actually, that is not quite accurate. He has a bit of a background in Polish folk dancing, and several years of gymnastics under his belt, but he credits Krew with really awakening the dancer within.

"I thought, "Oh, my gosh, I am going to look like an idiot going in there!" says Adam of his first thoughts when friends encouraged him to join them in checking out the Krew. "I had no experience at all and sure enough I was put in the very front and was mortified. But, I got to know Vanessa and she taught me what I know now with my attitude and my confidence is through the roof. She is almost like my sister with the connection we have. With what I have learned from her, I know I can carry this on to the best of my ability.

"I want to be able to take what Vanessa has taught me and have it explode even more through people and dance."

Building on their success this year at competitions, they hope to take their moves more into the community and onto the competitive circuit in the next season, and watching them do so is teacher Louise Howlings. Ms. Howlings is the teacher who helped step in to make the revived Krew a reality.

With a passion for dance, she was eager to get involved and has seen firsthand the benefits it brings to students.

"I really like that we have made this a very safe environment for kids to come and just be themselves and express themselves," she says. "Students have mentioned they really like coming here after school where they can come and be themselves and not have to worry about what other people think. They can just move around, be silly, no one is judging them and they can learn to dance at the same time.

"Maybe in school these are kids who might be sitting at the back of the class and not contributing much, and [this gives them the] confidence that could be applied to the classroom and they might be able to shine in the classroom a little bit more."