

By Julia Woodbury

DANCING *B*ALLROOM

*One group of dancers
help some special
partners to learn
the joy of dancing—
ballroom style.*





Cassidy Edgington is learning to ballroom dance with her volunteer partner, Richard Davis, a past member of the BYU ballroom touring team, as they get ready for their performance at a Special Olympics ballroom dance event.

The room is charged with competitive energy. Dancers in sparkling dresses and sharp tuxedos swirl and spin on an open dance floor under brightly colored lights. The Brigham Young University DanceSport Ballroom Competition is in full swing, and the music and tension mount as more and more competitors fill the floor.

Then suddenly the din of the crowd quiets, and the competitive edge of the atmosphere dissipates as a new group of couples takes the floor.

Who are they? Special Olympics athletes and their volunteer partners are competing in their first-ever ballroom dance event. The music begins, and the crowd, with supportive enthusiasm, erupts into cheers as the couples begin to gracefully waltz across the floor.

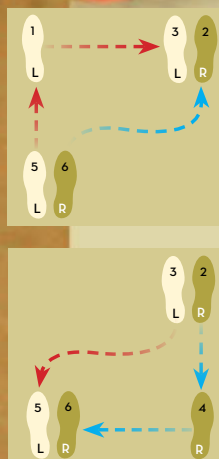
From the sidelines, college sophomore Allie Edgington watches as her goal to create a Special Olympics dance event unfolds. It was a dream that was sparked, in part, by her love for her sisters. And now it is a reality blessing many lives and helping Allie and others understand how Heavenly Father loves His children.

Loving and Lifting Each Other

Support and encouragement are second nature among Allie and her siblings. Their trials bring them closer, and their triumphs take them all higher. Allie's brother and twin sisters were all diagnosed with Fragile X Syndrome, a genetic condition resulting in mental impairment and autistic behaviors.

Allie, an avid dancer, is a dance education major and a member of BYU's touring ballroom team. In 2008 she was named Miss Provo, going on to become the first runner-up to Miss Utah 2009. As the title holder, Allie needed a platform or specific cause to promote. She showed her support for her siblings by promoting Special Olympics. For the past seven years Allie's brother, Tanner, has competed in Special Olympics, a program providing Olympic-style athletic events for disabled children and adults.

However, Allie noticed that her younger sisters, 17-year-old twins Courtney and Cassidy, were reluctant to participate. "Our brother has done well in Special Olympics, and he likes it a lot, but we're just not so into it," Courtney explains.





Dance partners practice their routines. (Top) Couples join together for a group bow after their performance. (Bottom) The Special Olympians show off their trophies. (Far right) Allie Edgington has an arm around each of her sisters, Courtney and Cassidy. (Inset) Their brother Tanner. Allie's siblings were her inspiration for the event.

Wanting her sisters to succeed, Allie started looking for ideas. "I got to thinking that maybe there was some way to get them involved, some way to help them be comfortable enough to participate," Allie says.

When a friend mentioned that the state of Indiana had held the first Special Olympics dance event, Allie knew she had found her solution. Combining her dance education major with her Special Olympics platform and her desire to help her sisters, Allie hatched a plan to create a Special Olympics ballroom dance event in Provo.

Learning in Her Shoes

The waltz music finishes, and the Special Olympics couples spin out and take deep bows for the enthusiastic crowd. Then they exit the floor and file into a row of chairs on the sidelines or go backstage to wait for their next event, the cha-cha.

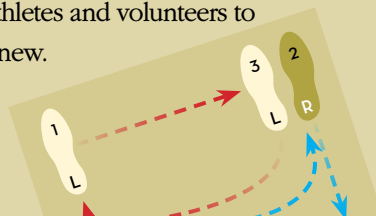
Backstage, Courtney sits with her sister Cassidy and cradles a pair of high-heeled ballroom shoes in her lap. They are scuffed and very flexible. "They're comfortable because Allie wore them out," Courtney explains, "and now I get to use them."

While lively music blares from the speakers, Courtney quietly talks about her sister. "I want to be like Allie. She dances a lot, and I want to do a lot of dance at my school." Cassidy chimes in, "I've learned a lot from just watching her."

More than just learning steps and routines, these sisters know that they've learned a lot about life by dancing with their sister. "I can have fun, even though some things are still a little scary. I can be comfortable," Courtney says. When asked about what advice she would give to other teens, she adds, "Just get involved and do things that you don't usually do. Get out and have fun!"

New Friends and Fun

Allie's idea helped her sisters to get out and have fun and, in the end, it was also a great way for the other athletes and volunteers to try something new.



Out by the dance floor, Emily Chai, one of the volunteers, sits with Connor Morris, her cha-cha partner. Like other athletes and volunteers, they've become good friends while learning to dance together. "After practices we all would stay and get involved in an impromptu dance party. I think we all just loved the interaction," Emily says.

Interaction was one of Allie's biggest goals for the athletes. Over the course of a few months, she taught six weekly workshops where the athletes were matched with a volunteer partner and learned to dance. "I hoped that the experience would give the athletes a chance to interact with people they really look up to and admire," Allie explains.

For Emily, these workshops were one of the best parts of the experience. "It has been fun to watch the participants get really excited. I think that excitement became the whole reason I wanted to do this."

Happiness in What They Can Do

The other competitors soon take their final bow, and it's time for the Special Olympics athletes to perform the cha-cha. While everyone lines up and gets ready to go back onto the





floor, Keilani Stolk, another volunteer, excitedly describes the feeling of dancing with the Special Olympics athletes. "It's not about how good you are; it's about having fun and being friends." In Special Olympics, there are no winners and losers, only athletes trying their best and having fun.

Richard, a past member of the BYU ballroom touring team, adds, "It is so rare to have an event where you just care how everyone else is doing. I just want everyone to have fun and to do well."

Under the bright lights these special dancers spin, twirl, and cha-cha to a chorus of cheers and claps from the crowd. It is clear from the smiles on their faces and the enthusiasm they show in their dance that, for these dancers, having fun and supporting each other is the goal.

"The athletes just have the most wonderful spirit about them,"



Allie says, watching from the sidelines as her students perform. "Instead of focusing on those things they can't do, they come and have so much happiness in the things they can do."

Looking back on her experience, Allie knows that she has been blessed. Beginning a Special Olympics ballroom event allowed her to help her sisters, helped her move forward on her own goals, and strengthened her understanding of God's love. Watching her students take their final bow, Allie says, "The athletes' love for life is such a testimony to me of the purity and goodness that can exist in the world.

They give so freely of their own love to everyone. I know that Heavenly Father loves them." **NE**

