

## Young Dancers in Chattanooga, Tennessee Explore the Spirit of the Wild Mustang

By: Jennifer Watts Hoff

For dozens of young dancers participating in summer programming for Ballet Tennessee in Chattanooga, Tennessee this year, the wild Mustang—and its struggle for survival—was completely unfamiliar. But when their program concluded in late July 2011 with a choreographed performance that explored the spirit of the wild Mustang, it was clear the students had come full circle.



### BALLET TENNESSEE

The project was a partnership between Ballet Tennessee, Mustang Leadership Partners, and the City of Chattanooga and aimed to teach the students how their development as dancers and other life experiences closely mirror the life and behavior of the Mustang. These students came from all walks of life: the inner city, rural communities, public and private schools. And, together, they translated what they learned about Mustangs into an inspiring performance for the community.

“Seeing the dance students embrace the Mustang and bring elements of the Mustang’s spirit to life through dance was truly inspiring,” said Sue Anne Wells, Director of the Mustang Leadership Partners program. “Partnerships like this help raise awareness about the plight of the Mustang and also touch lives on a much deeper level.”

The program launched with a visit from three Mustangs who are part of the Mustang Leadership Partners (MLP) program, which provides girls and young women with an opportunity to develop, practice, and improve relationship skills, responsibility, social accountability, self-awareness, and self-confidence. The MLP program works with girls

who attend the Chattanooga Girls Leadership Academy, Tennessee’s first all-girls public charter school, which serves grades 6-12 and has a curriculum focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The MLP program requires a year-long commitment and students meet every Saturday, covering a range of topics related to the wild Mustang and equine care, including safe horse interactions, Mustang branding identification, anatomy and physiology, behavior, haltering, leading, riding, and the six keys to harmony.

On a baseball field at the Patten Center, a City of Chattanooga recreation center, three MLP students led the Mustangs through a series of movements as Wells discussed the intricacies and challenges of building trust and training a wild Mustang that has never had any human contact before being forced into captivity. Many of the movements were compared to dance moves and were related to the challenges dancers face as they learn and grow as dancers.

“We explored the natural movements of mustangs and horses,” said Barry Van Cura, Director of Ballet Tennessee. “The dialogue between the trainer and the horses is done in French, and they actually use some French terms that ballet dancers know.”



The MLP students were also able to demonstrate the leadership and confidence required to teach the Mustang a series of complicated movements and, more importantly, the trust required between trainer and horse (or teacher and student).

“Most of our students had never been around horses prior to enrolling in the MLP program,” said Wells. “To see the confidence of the students as they led the Mustangs through the movements, in front of a huge crowd, was wonderful. The MLP students have come so far in a short period of time.”

One MLP student, April, was so fearful of horses when she first started the program that she could not even stand next to a horse’s stall. But, one year later there is no other place she’d rather be than the farm.

“Now I have fallen in love with the horses, and it feels good to conquer my fear,” said April. “They teach me things that I didn’t know, and I teach them, and we work together. You have to be able to communicate for the horses to trust you, you have to be a leader. I would like to adopt a horse or two of my own and teach other people what I have learned here.”

In addition to seeing a live performance from the Mustangs, the dance students also watched *Untamed Legacy: America’s Wild Mustang*, a documentary produced by WTCI-PBS that focuses on the plight of Mustangs and their struggle for survival as resources diminish. The documentary also shows

creative ways people are working to save the Mustang from becoming extinct.

These experiences traveled back to the dance studio where the dancers created and translated their ideas into movement. The choreography addressed themes related to the Mustang, including freedom and the loss of freedom; learning new things; developing new vocabulary and understanding; relationships with one another and humans; the beauty of space and the open plains; the elements of nature; and the six steps to harmony. The young dancers worked together to determine the direction of the original piece, which was performed at the Fine Arts Center at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga on July 22nd.

When the curtain was drawn and the dancers performed, the energy and fighting spirit of the Mustang could be felt throughout the performance hall. And, in an exciting finale, all of the dancers joined guest artist Frederick Davis of Dance Theatre Harlem onstage as he embodied the spirit of the Mustang—an inspiring end to a three week journey into the world of the Mustang.

*To learn more about Mustang Leadership Partners visit [www.mustangleadershippartners.com](http://www.mustangleadershippartners.com). To view *Untamed Legacy: America’s Wild Mustang* visit [www.wtcitv.org](http://www.wtcitv.org) and click on “watch online.”*

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