

Jessica Davis and the Vernonia Ballet

Jessica Davis has been teaching ballet in Vernonia for 25 years, and directing the Vernonia Ballet for 12 years

By Scott Laird

Eleven years ago *Vernonia's Voice* published a feature article in our December 2007 issue about the new Vernonia Ballet and Director Jessica Davis. Days after the article appeared in print the community was flooded and most readers were probably too busy trying to clean up and dry out to read that article.

Eleven years later, Jessica Davis and the Vernonia Ballet are still teaching young students the art of dance and holding regular recitals each spring and holiday season. "It's great to be able to help provide this opportunity for the kids right here in Vernonia," says Davis. "We've been able to open it up to so many different kids and that's all I've really wanted – to be able to help this community."

"It's been an interesting decade and a lot has changed in the last 11 years," she says. "We got to have the final performance on the Washington Grade School stage. We've had young students who helped teach when they got older and have since graduated from high school. Now we have a whole new group and new things we're doing."

Davis has been teaching ballet in Vernonia for about 25 years, starting when she was just 12 years old for Evergreen Dance Academy. She started the Vernonia Ballet 12 years ago and has guided its growth as it's expanded. "When I started I had a record player and about nine songs," says Davis with a laugh. "Now we have CDs and blue tooth."

In recent years Davis has been able to expand the classes she offers for students, with the help of several assistants. Currently Sarah McColm is helping as an assistant instructor. Katie



Davis is teaching for the second year and working with the preschool group in Ballet I. Vanessa Johnson is teaching the Ballet II class. Natalie Niederkorn is teaching the hip-hop dance class. Davis continues to teach the intermediate and advanced class, while co-teaching with her assistants. She says she currently has about 60 students in all her dif-

ferent programs.

"Eventually I would like to add some acting and theater options," says Davis. "There are kids that would like to be up on stage that don't want to dance, so we're trying to add more variety." She said she has also had some interest in summer classes and adult classes.

Davis, her assistant instructors, and her students, are currently preparing for their annual holiday show. This

year's performance will be "The Nutcracker Remix" on December 14 at the Vernonia Schools Commons. "I'm really excited about this because we've got some really fun stuff planned for it, including some performances by our hip-hop students," says Davis. In the spring the Vernonia Ballet will present "Robin Hood," which Davis says will include some Irish step dancing and hip-hop, and some acting. Vernonia Ballet productions always feature a variety of beautiful costumes, some hand-made, as well as lots of props and stage sets.

Davis says they did a fundraiser for the program last year and purchased mirrors for the class. "That's been a huge help," says Davis. "I've seen a 180 degree change in the kids because they can see to correct themselves."

In the past, classes had been held at the Vernonia Community Learning Center and at Grace Family Fellowship Church. Davis relocated to the Vernonia Grange three years ago. "The Grange Hall has been a fabulous place for us," says Davis. "We couldn't ask for anything better."

The Vernonia Ballet has received a lot of support over the years from the Vernonia Lions Club, the Vernonia Fire Department, and many businesses, and especially from Vernonia Hands On Art (HOA). "They've always helped support us and helped bring in donations," says Davis about HOA. "We've been working even closer with them recently and becoming more affiliated with them."

Davis says she is getting a lot of help from the current group of parents of her



students. "We have families that help back stage. We have people who have made donations to help pay the tuition for families that can't afford it."

For Davis, it's not just about teaching dance. "As the kids come back each year I get to develop a friendship and a relationship with them," she says. "We've seen kids grow in their confidence levels. Sometimes it's with kids you don't expect to see it from. Sometimes, before you know it, a kid that came in with some issues and that I wasn't sure how to work with them, is the one that you want being the leader. It's really encouraging to see these kids embrace the roles we give them in our productions, and see them grow, mature, and change. That is probably the biggest blessing for me. It's been so much fun to watch the kids grow and develop, not just as dancers, but as people."

For more information go to their Facebook page Vernonia Ballet LLC."

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