

LIFESTYLES

WEEKEND, MARCH 21-22, 2015

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Dancers Terika Christensen, Kendyl Thorne, Paige Skinner, Ashleigh Bolling and Charla Simons perform the Rhythmic Mode dance number "Wounded Warrior" during a send-off performance for the state dance competition Monday in Pendleton. Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Dancers take on gritty subject

Rhythmic Mode honors veterans as they head to state competition

By KATHY ANEY
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The soldier gazed out from the painting, a young Pendleton pilot who had died after a rocket-propelled grenade downed his Chinook helicopter in Afghanistan.

A gentle halo rimmed his head. An angel hovered over his right shoulder.

This likeness of Adrian Stump appeared on a rolling panel used in a routine performed by the Pendleton High School Rhythmic Mode dance team. During Monday's showcase performance in the PHS gym, the 28 girls donned sparkly versions of World War II nurses' flight suits and portrayed the stark realities of war through dance, honoring Stump and others who have served and sacrificed. The squad would take the routine to the OSAA Dance & Drill state championships in Portland later in the week.

The gritty topic of war was something new for the talented seven-time state championship team that routinely favors fantasy over real life. Last year's routine featured a haunted house with a beating heart and motorized spiders with glowing red eyes. Before that came "Psycho Circus," a Tim Burton-style tale that included a diabolical ringmaster and dancers on stilts.

This year, head coach and choreographer Debbie Kishpaugh stunned the team by sticking to reality.

The 2015 theme, she told them at the big reveal this fall, was Wounded Warriors. The dancers seemed slightly disoriented at the

unexpected turn.

Coaches eased them into the concept by walking them to the war memorial at the Pendleton Pioneer Chapel and then to Stillman Park, where veterans of several different wars had gathered at Kishpaugh's request. One of them was Debbie's husband, Roesch Kishpaugh, who had served two tours in Vietnam.

"They shared with the team what they did, what they thought, what they felt," Kishpaugh said. "It made quite an impression."

"It was cool to hear their stories," said senior dancer Haley Parsons.

In later weeks, the dancers watched "Fury," "Unbroken" and "American Sniper" to marinate in the subject before learning their

new routine. After months of honing the performance, the team left town this week for the state competition in Portland with high-octane hopes and a passion for America's veterans.

"It became really important to the kids," Kishpaugh said. "I think it surprised them how much."

Artist Daniel Bluestein, an inmate at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, designed the rolling prop pieces at Kishpaugh's instruction. Each would have two hinged panels that would allow for three scenes — on the front, the back and internally, in a Rubik's Cube sort of way.

Along with Stump's panel, he designed panels that depicted two other local veterans — Roesch Kishpaugh (shown at age 20) and Ashleah Markle, a Pendleton native and Army National Guard soldier who served in Afghanistan with Stump. When the panels are



The Rhythmic Mode dance team lifts the 400-pound custom designed tarp they perform on onto a cart after dancing Monday in Pendleton. The team has 15 minutes to set up, dance and tear down all of their props during their performance at the state dance competition. Staff photos by E.J. Harris

"I don't usually cry, but that routine makes me tear up every single time. It's an amazingly powerful and beautiful performance."

— Ashleah Markle, veteran



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Rhythmic Mode dancers Maria Knibbs, Kacey Robbins and Allison Savage perform in front of three panels depicting local veterans. The veterans are Ashleah Markle, Adrian Stump and Roesch Kishpaugh.

Staff photos by E.J. Harris

flipped and folded, a flag appears and later a military funeral.

Bluestein built the pieces with about 10 other inmates who constructed and fabricated what they needed and then painted people and scenes. Bluestein added the halo and angel to Stump's panel.

"I wanted to honor him," the inmate said. "It was a big deal to me."

Bluestein and his band of artists and tradesmen won't get to leave the prison to view the performance, of course. Those who did watch, however, included Markle and Roesch Kishpaugh and Adrian's sister, Molly Stump.

Markle, a 2003 PHS graduate, has watched Rhythmic Mode perform for years. This particular routine triggered deep emotions.

"I don't usually cry, but that routine makes me tear up every single time," she said. "It's an amazingly powerful and beautiful performance."

She planned to watch the state

performances via live streaming on her computer.

Molly Stump was a Rhythmic Mode dancer the year her brother died. Her fellow dancers, more like sisters really, helped her deal with the trauma of losing Adrian.

"That whole year, they were my support group," she said. Of the routine, she said, "It is very honoring. He would love it."

Roesch Kishpaugh said the performance pushed his thoughts back to Vietnam.

"It pulled at memory strings," he said. "I thought about the people who sacrificed their lives."

Seeing veterans and other community members react with emotion buoyed the team.

"It became personal," said senior dancer Katie Scruggs. "We saw the impact of our message. We were proud to call it our own."

Kishpaugh said she feels pride in how her dancers have embraced their message.

"I think they've enjoyed the journey," she said. "This is one of our most difficult routines and the only one that has value other than entertainment value."

Last year, the team's string of six straight state titles ended after moving up to the uber-challenging Show category, which involves the additional complexity that comes with set pieces and props. Pendleton took fourth.

Kishpaugh said her dancers are ready with a polished performance, but doesn't know how the panel of judges will react. That angel hovering over Adrian's shoulder will affect the dancers, she knows, but not the judges.

"No one will see it. It won't change our score," she said. "But ... it is cool to have a routine that has meaning and purpose."

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Hannah Schofield pins a hat on Rhythmic Mode dancer Kacey Robbins while the team prepares to dance at a send-off performance Monday at Pendleton High School. Staff photo by E.J. Harris