

Janae McKenzie

Jennifer Highbarger stepped through the doors of Orr Street Studios, small child in tow. She grinned from ear to ear as she went to go get her “little nugget” a snack from the cafe. Her “little nugget,” Olive, is a child with Down syndrome, a family friend and one of her dance students.

Columbia born and raised, Highbarger, 48, is a single mother of two, Jacy, 19, and Truman, 17. Highbarger is the founder and coordinator of the DanceAbility class series at the School for Missouri Contemporary Ballet, as well as a special education physical therapist for young children at Columbia Public Schools. Highbarger found her calling in the world of assistive movement, both from injury recovery and helping others overcome disabilities.

Highbarger grew up a competitive gymnast, and a promising one at that. However, the more competitive college offers she received faded out of view the day she blew out her knee in her senior year. The physical therapy she received following this injury sparked Highbarger’s interest in the career.

Having had a close relationship with former MU gymnastics coach Charles “Jake” Jacobson, Highbarger accepted an offer as a walk-on gymnast her freshman year, competing in her sophomore year until her second knee injury.

With her gymnastics career over, Highbarger focused on her education as a physical therapist. Once her schooling introduced her to pediatric physical therapy, everything clicked.

Highbarger worked contracting out to health care clinics, and took pediatric work wherever she could get it. Being a school physical therapist is the last thing she ever thought she’d be. She found, however, that she could combine her past experience with her current setting.

“You get to work on playing on the playground, you get to work on walking because they are just learning to walk,” Highbarger said. “It was actually the best of both worlds: you can still take that kind of clinical approach even though it’s in the schools.”

It was her background with this kind of work that led her to found DanceAbility at the Missouri Contemporary Ballet’s school.

Highbarger ran into Olive’s mother, Katie Werth, in the produce section of Schnucks seven years ago. During their conversation, Werth explained that her daughter had trouble keeping up with other local gyms and suggested that Highbarger start some kind of dance class with assistive movement. The way Highbarger dove into the idea impresses Werth to this day.

“She’s a doer,” Werth said. “She has a good idea, and then she researches how to get it done, and then she makes it happen. She’s kind of fearless in that way.”

Missouri Contemporary Ballet's school is a nonprofit organization, so the DanceAbility program leans on community funding and resources to keep in operation, often coming from Boone County Family Resources. This organization allocates funds from a specially designated property tax levy for what they determine to be "Therapeutic Recreation."

Support Coordinator Johanna Bartlett works closely with Highbarger and the DanceAbility program. She admires the extra volunteer work Highbarger does, even after a full day of working with Columbia Public Schools. Bartlett finds that this work allows children to act like children.

"Sometimes it's kind of clunky, sort of spinning around with supports," Bartlett said. "But it's their movement and they love it. And it's so fun to watch. Kids love the music piece. Everybody loves to wiggle around to music, so why wouldn't our kiddos?"

Highbarger places a focus on running the DanceAbility classes like "regular dance classes," with some adjustments. Children with developmental disorders can feel cared for when visuals and extra movement between breaks are added.

In her work with the ballet school, Highbarger has watched children make great strides in their development. One girl with autism spectrum disorder stuck out in Highbarger's mind as a reminder of the required patience.

"She came in, and I had to hold her hand the whole time," Highbarger said. "I remember it took six weeks for her to figure out how to go up on her toes. I remember thinking, 'oh, this is the sixth week' and then all of a sudden, boom. There she is; she's figured it out. That's how long it takes some kids to learn something like that. Now she comes in and she sits, she waits. She follows all of the rules, she doesn't have a one-on-one, she's pretty independent."

When teaching children with developmental disorders, Highbarger believes the extra attention needed requires her to be firm with students in classes.

"It's not always light and fun," Highbarger said. "There's some little kids in there crying a lot, but I've done it long enough that I know that they're crying not because they don't like it...but it's just new and it's scary. Sometimes it probably comes across as mean because I'm like 'We're gonna do this. And it's going to be hard and you're going to cry for a bit, but it's gonna be okay.'"

Werth admires the way Highbarger pushes her students, describing it as a balancing act to both be kind to the children and to push them to grow, even under parent supervision.

"Some parents don't want to push the kids as hard," Werth said. "She really is kind of awesome at taking the temperature of the room. Knowing how best to serve the kid and when to tell the parent to step back and she just does it in a way that's super respectful and smart."

Between working as a special education physical therapist at CPS and volunteering as coordinator for DanceAbility, Highbarger keeps herself busy by helping her community's children express themselves. The families she works with admire how she manages her various responsibilities with grace and style.

"Somehow, I think Jennifer has 42 hours in a day to do all of the stuff that she does, and keep giving of herself the way she does," Werth said. "She's just one of those people where you're like, 'how do you do it all?', and then do it well and with a smile."