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Wilson alum strives to revive dance teams for Jackson, Gray middle schools

By KC Cowan
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Whatever happened to the dance team at Wilson High School? Once one of the premier activities at Wilson, young women endured tough auditions with fierce competition to win a coveted spot as a “Trojane.”

The team would dance halftime performances at football and basketball games. They had great uniforms and were looked up to in the school. But while other Portland high schools have dance teams, Wilson hasn’t had one since 2013.

High school students have so many activity choices these days, it makes sense that some long-time clubs may fall by the wayside, because of waning popularity.

“There are a lot of different options for high school students,” said Gina Aman of the Portland School District athletics office. “Sports, clubs, academics. Kids are pulled in multiple directions so it’s hard to figure out where they want to go.”

One former Wilson alum, however, is doing her best to revive the tradition.

Maureen Berrie-Lawson was a Trojane herself, as she jokingly puts it, “...back when the earth was cooling.” She has nothing but fond memories of performing and competing on dance team.

“You know how people ask you what teacher had a profound effect on your schooling?” she asked. “One of

my answers is Mrs. Lee, who was my dance team coach at Wilson. Mrs. Lee wasn’t a great dancer, but she was fair and kind and we still trained hard and won many first place titles.”

Now Berrie-Lawson is the coach and choreographer. She is not starting her dance team at Wilson, however. Her earlier efforts last year failed to build any team.

“Mostly, because there are no funds, no practice space, and no administrators have time to lend support. Without proper support, the participants will not come.”

So instead, Berrie-Lawson is trying to build support and enthusiasm for dance team at Robert Gray and Andrew Jackson middle schools.

“By building a dance program at the middle school level, we can entice the interested and talented individuals at an age to build a very strong program and continue through high school and beyond,” she said. “I met with district athletic director Marshall Haskins and then dance and cheer director Gina Aman in the district athletic office and we devised a middle school pilot project. If we are successful at Jackson and Gray, we will assist other Portland middle schools to build a similar program.”

West Sylvan currently has a dance team and Sellwood has had dance programs for the past 15 years, as does Da Vinci. So there is enthusiasm for dance teams from the district, though not much in the way of financial support. Travel expenses to competitions can run



Middle schoolers try out for dance team. Left to right in the kickline are Ruby Minato, Amelia Winkelman, Uma Freeman, Aslan Newson, Mya Gray, Aria Morgan, Audrey Carlson. (Post photo by KC Cowan)

about \$500, with another \$250 for the competition fees.

“We pay for competition costs, and try to help with transportation costs and uniforms,” said Aman. “We help them out to get a discounted rate. We’re not in a financial position to pay for coaches. But my hope is we’ll have it across the board, eventually.”

Berrie-Lawson and others are stepping up in a volunteer capacity to do just that. She is Head Coach and choreographer.

“As of now, Jerry Watson Jr., a graduate of Parkrose Dance Team, is assistant coach and we have some interested parties waiting in the wings to join us,” she said. “There is not a single coach that expects to get rich leading a sport. We do it expecting the gratification will be knowing that we’ve helped build character in our youth and

because we love it.”

The first round of auditions took place in February—the first steps towards rebuilding a tradition that Berrie-Lawson says can be a life changer for some girls

“Dance team had a huge impact on shaping me into the person I am today more than anything else I can think of from my youth. I can remember wanting to dance so badly, I couldn’t imagine my life if I didn’t make it on the team! All young people have to have a desire or passion they identify with at work in their lives. If that isn’t esteem-building, I don’t know what is.”

Girls interested in joining the dance team must be currently in fifth grade and plan on attending Wilson High School as a freshman. Contact Maureen Berrie-Lawson at grumpyswife925@gmail.com