

## By Alicia Doyle

### The Writer Specializing in Good News

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Photos by KRISTIE AKIN/SPECIAL TO THE STAR

## Nonprofit teaches ballet to children with special needs

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After taking two years of ballet and mastering the relevé, plié and other techniques, Liam Kay knows what he wants to be when he grows up.

“I really want to be a dentist, but I really more want to be a great ballet dancer,” the Thousand Oaks 8-year-old said.

Born with autism, the boy’s confidence has soared since he enrolled in ballet two years ago with Ballet for All Kids, said his mom, Jamie Kay.



“He has no qualms about saying, ‘I take ballet’ and ‘I love to dance,’ ” she said. “This is what he looks forward to.”

The lessons also have helped strengthen her son’s core, she said.

“He doesn’t fall out of his chair at school anymore since we started ballet,” she said.

The boy is among many children with special needs reaping emotional and physical benefits through Ballet for All Kids, a nonprofit founded by

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Bonnie Schlachte, of Ojai, who has a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is also a director with People's Care, an endeavor that supports people with developmental and physical disabilities.

"When I realized that I was not going to dance professionally, I made the decision to work with children," said Schlachte, who has dance studios in Encino and Westlake Village. "I fell in love with working with children and adults with disabilities."

Her classes attract youths with a range of special needs, including anxiety disorders, behavioral issues, cerebral palsy and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as well as those who are deaf or blind.

"Our mission is to give children the opportunity to get a classical ballet education regardless of their abilities or disabilities," Schlachte said.

The classes are structured to create an environment of success for each child, with one-on-one assistance from a team of volunteers.



"We give every child the opportunity to reap the benefits of a classical ballet education — increased confidence, self-esteem and self-discipline," Schlachte said. "Just because a child has a special need doesn't mean they should be excluded from gaining the benefits every child gets from taking ballet."

Elise Guerrero, whose 13-year-old daughter, Jillian, has autism, said the teen learned how to be part of a group activity and follow directions.

"She has also cultivated a love of music," said Guerrero, of Westlake Village. "She seems more willing to participate and be part of a group rather than playing by herself. She has branched out and wanted to be closer to people."

Socially, children are able to make friends and improve in school because of better focus and listening skills and can better tolerate loud or crowded environments, Schlachte said.

"Overall, our students have an increase in range of motion, core strength, coordination, balance, poise, and better motor planning," Schlachte said.

Such was the attraction for Jennifer Rowe, of Simi Valley, who brought her 2-year-old, Zoey, to a Ballet for All Kids session for the first time on Saturday.

"I thought it would be good for her to build her core and her legs," said Rowe, whose daughter has physical disabilities. "I took her to another ballet class, but she wasn't able to participate. Here, she can participate and they're taking special care of her needs."

Call 524-5503 or visit [www.balletforallkids.com](http://www.balletforallkids.com) for more information.

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