

Dancing together can help build a sense of community



DANIELLE L. FRAENKEL

GUEST
ESSAYIST

Dancers know that rhythm, synchrony and shared movements build group cohesion.

I saw this truth emerge in a major community event on Oct. 14: Dances on the Avenue. Children, teens and adults representing a spectrum of colors and ethnic groups performed and danced on University Avenue to celebrate ARTWalk's groundbreaking.

ARTWalk is an interactive outdoor museum about to be licensed by the state of New York. It will collect and exhibit works of art from all disciplines, including the visual arts, music, dance, theater and literature.

So far the city has widened the sidewalks of ARTWalk's urban trail from 5 to 8 feet. We have already selected designs by local artists to be imprinted in the sidewalks, commissioned and displayed eight benches designed by local artists and decorated two of the many lampposts on our interactive public walkway. We have a Culture Builds Community Grant for the lampposts, so this is going to be an ongoing event for quite awhile. The selected imprints and benches represent a wide range of expertise from an imprint by a 9-year-old to designs by well-known art figures in western New York.

As an ARTWalk board member, I was concerned about the lack of attention to dance. One result: an open call to the Rochester community for dance performances at the groundbreaking. We had lots of interest.

Individuals, working dance companies, storefront dancing schools, senior groups, ethnic



File photo

An audience member dances along University Avenue at the Dances on the Avenue event Oct. 14. Essayist Danielle Fraenkel describes how the event showed how dance can unite a community. The audience member pictured above, was one of many celebrating the groundbreaking for ARTWalk, a pedestrian art trail along University.

“
The audience was huge, but everyone got involved.
”

dance groups and groups that compete nationally submitted videos and statements about their visions for an outdoor performance. The jury, which included two dance/movement therapists, dancers, dance teachers, local business people and community residents, had a tough time deciding whom to

select. As in the calls for imprint and bench designs, the focus was on the aesthetic value and on finding a balance between the professional dancers and community representation.

In the end, the program included eight juried performances, two invited performances and interactive, audience participation dance events led by dancing docents. We had three performance sites. Two were a block apart. At the end of the dances at each performance site, the dancing docents emerged from the audience, streamers in hand, onto the performance area.

The docents did a short number that we had choreographed together, got the audience to join in and we all, docents and audience, danced down the

street to the next performance area.

As people learned the steps, we gave them streamers and they, too, became dancing docents. The audience was huge, yet everyone was involved. What a sight to see people who were pushing strollers dancing, elders dancing, people of all colors and shapes smiling as they walked, skipped or danced from one performance site to the next.

ARTWalk's executive director, Douglas Rice, who has been the soundman for many of the biggest dance companies in the states, said he had never seen such an attentive audience. As lively as people grew as they danced from performance site to performance site, they were completely silent while they watched the dancers — that's hundreds of people absorbed and involved.

Dances on the Avenue provided us with vital information. It demonstrated that people of all ages can dance, that children and adults of all abilities can study dance and perform together and that dance comes from many countries and in many forms. We learned that the environment can provide sources of inspiration for professional dancers, that dance can make political and social statements and that Monroe and surrounding counties have choreographers and companies that deserve serious attention.

With all that has been going on since Sept. 11, we needed this event. It showed how dance and music bring people together: How shared rhythms, synchronous movement and creative expression foster group cohesion and build community. □

Fraenkel is a board member of ARTWalk and director of Kinectons, a Rochester-based institute that provides dance movement therapy, counseling and professional training.