

Arts & Features

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Megan Dombroski- Staff Photographer

Eighteen young students from Mountain Area Child and Family Center joined Kelly Davis' UNCA African dance class last Wednesday.

African dance class welcomes children at UNCA

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The elated squeals of children rarely echo around UNC Asheville's campus, but last Wednesday, 18 preschool students joined Kelly Davis' African dance class.

UNCA alumna Cristyn Olenick brought her class of 3, 4 and 5-year-olds from Mountain Area Child and Family Center to watch and participate in traditional African dance.

"The children have been really interested in Africa and different places around the world, specifically a little obsessed with cheetahs. So we kind of tried to expand on their interests," Olenick said.

Olenick said Mountain Area teachers try to build on what children are interested in, and after taking the African dance class while attending UNCA, she knew it would be a great field trip for her students.

"We're just honoring the interests of some preschoolers," said UNCA health and wellness lecturer Constance Schrader.

Davis, who has taught dance for 12 years at UNCA, said she has taken dance classes to schools and done many performances on the quad for children.

However, these were the youngest children to join her class in the dance studio.

"It's really important, especially leaving a comfort zone like their classroom or the school," Davis said.

Witnessing art and communication, being comfortable around music and becoming familiar with people outside their homes and classroom are all important aspects for the children's education according to Davis.

Live musicians Chris Johansen and Donald McKinsey, who have performed in the class for many years free of charge, accompanied the class.

Lena Eastes, a participant in the class, said one of the things she enjoys most is the fact that there are live musicians in every class.

"I just think it's such a wonderful community. I've been taking it since my freshman year and I'm a senior. I've danced in the class three times and drummed once. I love the movement, the live drums," Eastes said.

Eastes, a cross-cultural sustainability student, said she tries to take the class before a long lab, because it is a great release of energy and use of her body.

Davis believes it is very important to expose people to different art forms, whether they are visual or performing arts, she said.

"It's pretty amazing what (the kids) probably absorb. You saw a lot of kids mimicking, and they'll hold onto that and take it back with them," Davis said.

According to Davis, a dance group

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— Lena Eastes,

participant in Kelly Davis' African dance class

can serve as something similar to a community, which she said could benefit a child greatly.

"It's very important to have the communal trust and to have a group, or family, outside of the mother and father that you feel comfortable sharing and learning with. Davis said the dancers also provide an extended family to the children.

Eastes said the class is a great way to learn about culture in a nontraditional way.

"I think culture is something that you can feel, and so it's hard to learn about a musical tradition in your mind. You have to learn in your heart, and it's a vibration that you feel. So, it's really critical to actually hear the music and

be dancing to the music. The rhythms say so much about where it came from," Eastes said.

Eastes also said giving children the freedom to move is beneficial to them.

"Sitting in a classroom reading and writing can really stamp out the spirit of a child. To have spaces for them to move, express themselves and be creative is extremely important," she said.

"Kids really need to move their bodies, and I think that every child is kind of a kinesthetic learner. I just think it was an all around neat experience for them," Olenick said.

Participation in Kelly Davis' African dance class is open to the public. It is held every Monday and Wednesday at 11:25 until 12:15 p.m.