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# Dance workshop for autistic children

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Told they were having a dance session with visiting dancers from New York, the autistic dance students at Goodwill Industries didn't know what to expect. Familiar with the quick steps of the Latin beats and the formal ballroom steps, the students shone on Friday through more contemporary, modern dance moves.

They welcomed the opportunity provided by the US Embassy, urged on by Barbara Olumide-Alleyne, chief executive officer of Goodwill Industries. Dressed in their leotards and tees they were ready for whatever was being shared in the hour-long session.

Taking them through the paces were visiting Battery Dance Company dancer and choreographer, Carmen Nicole Smith, assisted by her colleague Sean Scantlebury, also a trained dancer with Caribbean ties. He was born in Barbados. The dancers were in Trinidad to participate in the Coco Dance Festival at Queen's Hall.

From the word go, as Carmen took the children through a series of rigorous warm-ups, broad smiles appeared on their faces as they got excited about the different approach. Although some could be heard saying they were a bit tired, their enthusiasm didn't wane and they pushed ahead following Carmen's every move and instruction. Barbara said the children are chronologically between the ages 14-29 but have a mental capacity of those nine or ten years old. Looking at them, you only saw an eagerness to learn.

From tapping feet to crawling into push-ups and jumping jacks, the students' energy filled the hall at the development organisation at Fitzblackman Drive, Woodbrook. By the time the session rolled around to their passing an imaginary energy ball, the dancers' creative body movements were fully on display and there was no shyness. Looking on with interest was one of their dance tutors Gina John, who was invited by Barbara to expose her to a new experience and perhaps help her get some tips.

At the end of the session, Carmen said: "They were great and really sweet kids. They were eager to learn and they worked hard."

The children attend Goodwill from all areas of Trinidad and Tobago and are given a variety of vocational trainings, ranging from food preparation to applied arts like glass etching, in addition to dance. The group chosen for the dance workshop was among those who really love dancing. But funding is an issue and Goodwill can only afford about three to four sessions of dance a year.

Barbara said sessions like these are really appreciated.

"It's an inspirational experience which awakens their ability, when they realise what they can do. This session is not what is commonly known as dance in Trinidad, and I already have the approval of Gina to have a session, perhaps every Wednesday."

As for the children, they were thankful for the experience and gathered among themselves laughing and joking about the new way of dance.