

ENGAGED WITH THE WORLD



Empowering young women through dance

BY JAN GILLIS ('07)

Talk to Caitlin McAvoy ('15) for a few minutes, and you'll realize that performance is an important part of her life. Her Madison Experience as a musical theatre major and Honors student included acting, dancing and vocal performance. McAvoy's academic career provided an opportunity for self-discovery as well. "I realized there's an avenue for my art form to help people in a direct way," she says.

That realization stemmed from a Hillcrest Scholarship for Service and Leadership. The scholarship experience allowed her to travel to Deborah House in Sibiu, Romania, to teach dance to a group of 28 girls. Her goal: to research and implement a dance therapy-inspired program for young female survivors of domestic violence.

The challenge was daunting. Within a few days, McAvoy needed to develop a rapport

with the girls and prepare them for a public dance performance while at the same time navigating a significant language barrier.

"If I had not had the education I received at JMU, I would not have had this opportunity or been at all prepared for it," McAvoy says. "That is due especially to the Dance in Community class taught by professor Kate Trammell. During that class students learn how to use creative movement and dance activities with various populations such as day care classes, individuals with special needs and senior citizens."

What about the English/Romanian language barrier? "Communication was magical. We had a translator, but after the first day we didn't need the assistance. It's hard to explain, but we didn't need language. I taught by visuals, and the girls

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picked it up. Even outside of teaching we were able to communicate without a translator. We just used physical movement in order to convey what we needed to say," McAvoy explains. "I always say this, and it sounds so cliché, but dance *is* a universal language. After this trip, it's much more than just a saying to me."

McAvoy used part of her scholarship funds to purchase leotards, tights, tulle and prop materials for her Romanian students. The tulle, cut in strips and tied with ribbon, made perfect tutus for the young performers.

However, the experience was about more than crafts and dance movement. "My senior Honors thesis was 'Dancing with Romania: The Research and Practical Implementation of Dance Therapy for Victims of Sexual Abuse,'" says McAvoy. "I wanted to empower my students and help them see themselves as artists and strong women, which is why the performance aspect was so important."

Empowerment and performance go hand-in-hand. "It gave each participant a chance to say, 'I am here, I have some-

thing to express, and here is your chance to listen to my story,'" says McAvoy.

"One of my favorite moments was post-performance. One girl came up to me and in her broken English called herself a beautiful ballerina. That idea, that she saw herself as a beautiful being and a capable artist — that was what I wanted to accomplish."

In the end, McAvoy found a confidence and empowerment of her own. "In my future, I see myself opening a dance studio based on positive body image and female empowerment, as well as continuing service trips of this nature," she says.

"I went to Romania thinking I would change lives, but the girls changed mine in ways I could never imagine," says McAvoy. "I have now discovered what is the start of my life's work. I am planning my trip back to Romania and beginning my work locally to start dance therapy programs for girls surviving abuse. Without JMU I would have never found this life path, but now I can't imagine my life unfolding in a better fashion." M



(Clockwise): McAvoy shares a moment with a new friend in Romania; a musical theatre major, McAvoy and other cast members prepare for the JMU production of "All Shook Up"; in the future, McAvoy hopes to open a dance studio.

