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Teen ambassadors help tutus travel around the world



By Scott Luxor
Special correspondent

Katelyn Spohn and Rebekah Brodsky, both 15, are global ambassadors of goodwill.

Their mission is not about international diplomatic relations. And they're not seasoned politicians. Rather, they are teens on a mission to help bring the gift of dance to children in need around the world.

Katelyn, of Plantation, and Rebekah, of Coral Springs, are dancers at Encore Dance Theatre in Sunrise. They are teen ambassadors for Traveling Tutus, an organization whose purpose is to "collect and deliver dance costumes and attire to children all around the world."

Since it was founded in 2008, Traveling Tutus has sent dance attire to thousands of children in 29 different countries, from Haiti to Uganda. It mainly donates to children in orphanages, children's homes, foster care, hospitals or to other nonprofits with a focus on children in developing countries.

"Our friend who's been here since she was like 2 or 3 always did Traveling Tutus, and she brought us into it," Katelyn said.

Rebekah said when their friend graduated from high school, she passed the mantle to them.

Anne Brodsky, Rebekah's mother, has owned Encore Dance Theatre in Sunrise for seven years. She said she is always looking for ways to connect the dance studio to give back to the community. Her attention was brought to Traveling Tutus through a friend from another studio who asked if she would be interested in adopting the cause.

SCOTT LUXOR/CORRESPONDENT

Katelyn Spohn, left, of Plantation, and Rebekah Brodsky, of Coral Springs, are dancers at Encore Dance Theatre in Sunrise. They are teen ambassadors for Traveling Tutus, an organization whose purpose is to "collect and deliver dance costumes and attire to children all around the world."

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TUTUS

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“(The students) have a good feeling when they see the pictures of children wearing the costumes in other countries. There’s a much bigger picture out there that they get exposed to,” Brodsky said. “We wanted to pick (a cause) in the community that we can actually get the kids involved in. The student ambassadors are the ones collecting the costumes, having the bake sales and doing the Adopt A Square event that they just did.”

The event was organized by the students who created a poster with different amounts of money written on square stickers. People could take a note from the poster and put that amount of money in a jar at the front of the studio to give to the organization.

“Traveling Tutus has a really nice support system in place for the ambassadors. They’re guided through the process,” Brodsky said. “Tutus collects the clothes, then they disperse it — so we don’t really know specifically where our costumes are but they’re in constant communication. We know that they’re going out to all different countries.

“They’re trying to spread (the clothes) out to areas that need it — to kids that want to dance, but they



SCOTT LUXOR/CORRESPONDENT

Katelyn Spohn, right, of Plantation, and Rebekah Brodsky, of Coral Springs, practice in their ballet class at Encore Dance Theatre in Sunrise. They are teen ambassadors for Traveling Tutus.

don’t have the means to have a beautiful costume. And there’s something to be said that when you look the part, you feel so much better. It’s really inspiring,” she said.

Samantha Nelson, studio ambassador coordinator for Traveling Tutus, works with the youth volunteers throughout the country to coordinate and support their efforts. She said the program has increased the number of volunteers tenfold since it started.

“We have over 100 ambassadors in the program this year. Our ambassadors are from across America, and we have some in Canada and the Cayman Islands.

The program has grown exponentially in the past four years. We started out with less than 10 in 2014, and now we’re at 103,” Nelson said.

“The goal of our ambassador program is to help develop our ambassadors into great leaders. Our ambassador requirements, (i.e. fundraisers, costume drives, etc.) are designed to help them develop problem-solving skills, strengthen their creativity, develop a strong sense of responsibility and accountability and hone their communication skills,” she said.

“I cannot tell you how much these students have risen to the challenges

before them. They have shown incredible tenacity throughout the past few seasons, and we are so happy to see them grow into great dance leaders,” Nelson said.

Melanie Gibbs, based in South Florida, is the studio outreach coordinator for Traveling Tutus. Although the nonprofit does much of its work around the globe, it also does outreach to communities in the United States where there is financial need.

“I was introduced to some very special dancers from Deerfield Park Elementary, which is just five minutes from Boca Dance Studio. Deerfield Park just happened to be a recent recipient of Traveling Tutus costumes so we did the natural thing and invited them to perform with us at the Leave A Legacy Showcase. It was an awesome full-circle moment to introduce these two dancers to the Boca Dance Studio kids and see them all make that connection,” Gibbs said.

“Traveling Tutus makes a huge impact internationally but it was really cool to see their work being done right here in our own backyard,” she said.

The teen ambassadors



TRAVELINGTUTUS.ORG/COURTESY

Traveling Tutu dancing attire recipient in Guatemala.



TRAVELINGTUTUS.ORG/COURTESY

Traveling Tutu dancing attire recipients in Haiti.

have great things to say about their recently adopted cause.

The website for Traveling Tutus shows videos and photos of young dancers in developing countries practicing and performing while wearing the outfits that were donated through the nonprofit.

“Being able to spread (dance costumes) to other people who can’t afford them is such a great thing,” Katelyn said.

The two students are given specific responsibilities as leaders of the mission within Encore Dance. They are required to put on two main events each year in their roles.

Adopt A Square was one but they needed another to fulfill their roles.

“We came up with a day called Tutu Tuesday. We got all of our friends at the studio to wear tutus to dance in to spread the word. And then we donated those

tutus to the organization,” Katelyn said.

Rebekah added, “Then if they wanted to bring in any costumes that day, they could donate those as well. It’s like a day we created for donations.”

The teen ambassadors can’t say enough about how gratifying it is to give back and to know that their efforts help other children around the world to have the basic attire that all dancers need to perform.

“With the time we’ve been involved, it’s been really great. We’ve had to learn how to make fundraisers and events. Being involved with Tutu Tuesdays and giving back — it was fun,” Rebekah said.

“I totally suggest (other kids) get involved. It’s a great way to give back to your community and be involved with something cool and different. It’s something that’s for everyone.”

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