

# KERRVILLE DAILY TIMES

## *Social Graces*



Proud moms are clustered near the entrance of the room as perfect little gentlemen in suits and little ladies in party dresses and white gloves perch nervously on chairs. Director Shelley Sutton moves right into teaching these fourth and fifth-graders the right way to bow and curtsy. “Don’t stick your bottom out,” drawing giggles.

A casual observer might be forgiven for blinking twice. These oh-so-proper kids are the Playstation generation, after all, more familiar with Bart Simpson than Beaver Cleaver. But they have all signed up — thanks to those proud moms — for 6 weeks of cotillion.

The term may bring Southern belles to mind — but in the words of mom Bea Pruneda, this cotillion is “not a debutante ball.” These students are being taught the finer social skills by the *Jon D. Williams Cotillions*, a Denver-based company that has been teaching children and adults etiquette since 1949.

*Jon D. Williams Cotillions* instructs more than 10,000 children across the country each year on the importance of good manners - how to introduce yourself (feet together, good posture, eye contact and always a firm shake with your right hand), how to serve, escort and seat your partner, how to be comfortable in social situations and make others comfortable around you.

So why did a group of local moms form a Hill Country program want to bring these etiquette classes to town? “We thought it would be great because it teaches kids respect,” said Claire Mitchell, who helped organize the cotillion. “We thought it was desperately needed.

Table manners are not a lost art, but you have to tap into it. There are a lot of easy things you can do to make a good first impression.”

Mitchell, whose daughter is 10, said the parents of the younger students were impressed by how attentive the kids were. “They talked about bullying, true friends, how to earn respect, not gossiping or starting rumors,” adding that her daughter came home after one session determined to apologize to a classmate. She continued,

“It feels good to know something that you didn’t know before...they say knowledge is power, and the kids are feeling the strength from it.”

Merrily White, another organizer, attended cotillion as a youngster, but her own daughter has a few years to go. Samantha is in the first grade, but was able to attend the demonstration class conducted when the cotillion was first forming. “She really wanted to do it,” said White. “She came home and practiced her table manners. “I want to see if they will consider bringing in a younger class,” White continued. “It gives kids some extra confidence they wouldn’t have. It just provides some basic social skills not normally taught in class.

After discussing the arcane rules governing how many buttons on a suit jacket should be buttoned, Sutton promised the cotillion students, “All these things will become a reflex.” Soon the boys and girls are paired off to learn introductions, and more nervous giggling ensues.



Soon it's time for the real terror - learning how to dance. Groans and grimaces fill the room. "What if I don't want to be with a girl?" one boy asked, plaintively. "That's not an option here, sorry," was the brisk response. First up on these kids' dance cards is the foxtrot, which, involves – oh the horror! - actual contact.

"It's OK, he won't bite," the teacher assured one girl. "You have to get closer. Place your left hand on the gentleman's strong right shoulder." Initially, there are quite a few boys stepping on girl's feet, but eventually the dances begin to get in to the swing of things. Then it's on to the polka.

Pruneda is on the chapter's board; her 12 year old daughter Corley, is in sixth grade. "I felt it was an opportunity for my child to be exposed to things she might not be introduced to otherwise," she said.

"For her future, she will have at least been exposed to this environment and thus a little more comfortable. I don't know that I've ever been taught this stuff, like how to remember someone's name. I think people have a tendency to think these things are for the blue-bloods, but anyone can benefit, it really improves social skills for all types of situations."

Pruneda is quick to point out that the *U.S. Air Force Academy* requires its cadets to take these classes. Corley initially was skeptical about learning the foxtrot, said Pruneda. "But the next day, that's all the school talked about, and all of a sudden we had a waiting list for classes. Now, she can't wait to go to the next class."

"It's really fun," Corley concurred. "I've learned a lot about good manners. They make it easy to understand. I was dreading it, but now I've learned a lot." Corley said her initial embarrassment over getting all dressed up was dissipated by the realization that everyone was in the same boat-so it doesn't matter." Her class recently learned the jitterbug, which she described as sort of like swing dancing." You jump and twist – it's really fun," she said.

So what sort of life lessons is she really picking up? It runs the gamut, she said, "some things that you'll use every day, to things like learning who goes out the door first." Most importantly, she said, "you learn to be more comfortable in social situations."

"I'm proud to be a part of this," mom Bea Pruneda said. "I'm learning too. I just think these things are really important and people notice it." Carol Arnold has a 12 year old daughter, Julia, in the classes. She also has a niece and two nephews enrolled in this session. "I think it's wonderful," she said. "I love seeing the boys and girls all dressed up. It's amazing how well behaved the boys are when they get dressed up. It's a funny thing. They do act better. It makes them want to act more mature."

Beyond the superficiality of dressing up, Arnold said, the classes teach some valuable life lessons. "It's a wonderful experience to have boys and girls meet and learn to talk to each other in a controlled atmosphere and they feel better about themselves," she said.

The cotillion offered a 3-hour *LifeSkills* program for high school students this spring. "The class was designed to prepare students for college and career goals and learn how to be more comfortable and confident in both social and business situations," Mitchell said.

Subjects included everything from positive first impressions to dating etiquette, as well as dressing for success and how to find, apply, and interview for a job.



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