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The Joys of Poise

By Mike McPhee

Fifth-grader William Kilburn, his long, blond hair tucked into his blue suit coat, swallowed his fear and stiffly leaned over to ask Shyanne Studer if she would join him for a foxtrot.

She nervously accepted, and the two, trying to remember where their hands went, anxiously waited for the music to start.

“Wait for the big beat, and now it’s slide, together, right, together, and slide, back, together,” instructor Jon Williams said into the microphone, leading about 60 fifth- and sixth-graders through traditional dance steps as part of a class on social skills Monday at E.L. Foster Elementary School.

In a throwback to the days before cable television and video arcades, the students were being taught the finer points of social skills by Williams. His company, Jon D. Williams Cotillions, has come free of charge to Foster Elementary, in one of the poorer sections of southeast Arvada, for the past three years.

Williams reminded everyone that the boy holds the girl beneath her shoulder blade and the girl’s hand goes on the boy’s shoulder.

Everything was cool, except Kilburn, who was heating up in his buttoned blue suit. If only he could stop sweating. His father had helped him dress in the morning, and loaned him a tie, so he could look his best for Williams’ class, a two hour delve into the polite, well-mannered world of treating each other with respect and dignity, the way things used to be. The kids loved it.

Most of the boys voluntarily wore ties to school, and the girls wore their best dresses and bright shoes. Laughter and enthusiasm did much to mask the nervousness and anticipation, and all were rewarded with the pride they felt from learning to treat one another well.

“Manners are almost a lost art,” said Foster principal Pauline Bustaniante. “We just assume they get them, but they don’t.”

This is a fun way to learn to be polite, with grace and poise. Instead of yelling, ‘Yo,’ these kids learn a little respect.”



Williams teaches more than 10,000 schoolchildren across the country each year on the importance of good manners - how to introduce yourself (feet together, good posture, look someone in the eye and always shake with your right hand), how to serve your partner first, and how to show her to a chair, where she sits first.



“Good manners are important,” says Kilburn, 11, during a refreshment break, wiping the sweat from his forehead and crumbs from his mouth.

“If you’re polite, it can help you in business.

It can help you get a date.”

Studer, 11, clearly was having a good time as well, and looked pleased to be with Kilburn. “I like to dance. And I like to play football,” she said proudly. “She’s really good,” Kilburn chimed in, trying to swallow a chocolate chip before speaking.

Demand for classes in social graces has been growing dramatically, said Williams, in part because most families have both parents working now. Television has been destroying the sensitivities of young kids, some of the teachers added, and there are fewer and fewer places and events to practice the finer touches.

Echoing the cover story last month in U.S. News & World Report, “Whatever Happened to Good Manners?” Williams said his company is growing by leaps and bounds, primarily from corporations that realize their staffs don’t know the skills they should take for granted. Williams said many companies hire

him to teach social skills, even those as basic as how to eat correctly or how to introduce yourself to clients.

Williams has been teaching social skills for 25 years, taking over from his father who started the company 55 years ago. They have five staffers who travel to 50 cities throughout the country. Their courses have become a regular fixture at the Air Force Academy, teaching 1,400 cadets each year the finer points of a firm handshake or opening a door.

Williams just signed a contract to teach 150 insurance salesmen at a large firm in the East, and last week he received an inquiry from the football coach of a major university in the Chicago area.

“We’re getting more and more sports teams. Some of these guys don’t even know which silverware to use,” he said.