

How one night at a cotillion changed, well, everything.

DENVER MAY 2, 2011 - Upon entering the doors, the Cotillion program begins immediately, with the owner, Jon D. Williams III, standing in the center of the grand room, holding a microphone, and welcoming the children. Williams's mother and father were classic ballroom dancers personally trained by Fred Astaire. They started JDW Cotillions in 1949, which is now operated nationwide by their son, Jon D. Williams III. An alumnus of the University of Denver, Williams himself is an accomplished dancer and a former tennis star. It makes sense then that he exudes grace. He seized control of the 80 some kids with effortless aplomb. "How you act," he said in a soothing, matter-of-fact tone to the kids, "is not only a reflection of your character. It is also a demonstration of your education."



In no time, like a lion tamer working magic on kittens, Williams taught the children to introduce themselves and use proper posture when seated—“gentlemen do not

take a seat until the ladies sit.” And very shortly into that first session, the young gentleman were asking the young ladies to dance and escorting them to the dance floors. Of course, the roles were also reversed. Williams explained to the young ladies that they, too, should introduce themselves and take the lead. Ladies, he said, you will be competing for the same jobs and opportunities as the men, and giving a firm handshake and leading the proverbial dance is important.

Then it was the Fox Trot, the Jitterbug, and the Waltz. It's something to behold, watching your 10-year-old son ask someone's 10-year-old daughter if she would like to dance, taking her hand in his. It is one of those moments where seconds linger like seasons and you feel as if you are watching your child grow, and more to the point, *mature*.

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During the six-week program, the children learned things like “Introduction to Social Skills,” “Meeting New Friends,” “First Impressions,” and “Respect &

Consideration.” The last hoorah was a dance at the Brown Palace Hotel. This final event is the only one where the parents are invited to attend (as opposed to watching from afar) and are expected to participate. During the evening there is a time when daughters dance with fathers and sons with their mothers. At the Brown Palace affair, I noticed U.S. Senator Michael Bennet was on-hand. We chatted. It turned out that two of his three daughters, Caroline and Halina, were in the class and that one of the girls and True were sharing a waltz. They were easy to spot because, flats or not, his lovely daughter towered over my trembling son.

I noticed the senator stealing glances at his smart phone with what appeared, to me at least, to be an especially pensive look on his face. Much later, Senator Bennet would tell me that it had merely been typical business, nothing out of the norm, and he'd say that it was not until later that night, watching CNN, that he, just like the rest of us, would learn what had happened: Right about the time of the Cotillion, a world away, a team of U.S. Navy SEALs had killed Osama Bin Laden. Everywhere in the media, in the hours and days that followed, were reports of war, terrorism, crisis. There were the usual images of violence, civil unrest, and the incredibly provocative scenes of American youth gathered outside the White House, celebrating The Kill. It occurred to me that this has been the only world our 10-year-old, the only world that all fifth graders have ever known—this post 9-11 world.

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Indeed, our children's schedules, all of our schedules really, are hectic, and in what is a relentlessly chaotic and often harsh—ill mannered to say the least—world. As our children get older, as they *mature*, all of this will only become more a part of their reality. Later that evening, seeing the Bin Laden news and all of the imagery that went with it, I felt extraordinarily grateful for the cotillion. I was grateful that while the world had been spinning crazily, a group of children had been oblivious to it all, and instead were twirling together peacefully, working on being kind to one another, and enjoying the music, if only for a few hours on a spring evening at the Brown Palace. I was glad that those would be the children's memories of that night. I was glad that I watched my son, in his gray suit and sharp tie, ask his mother to dance, take her by the hand, and sway together in a waltz.