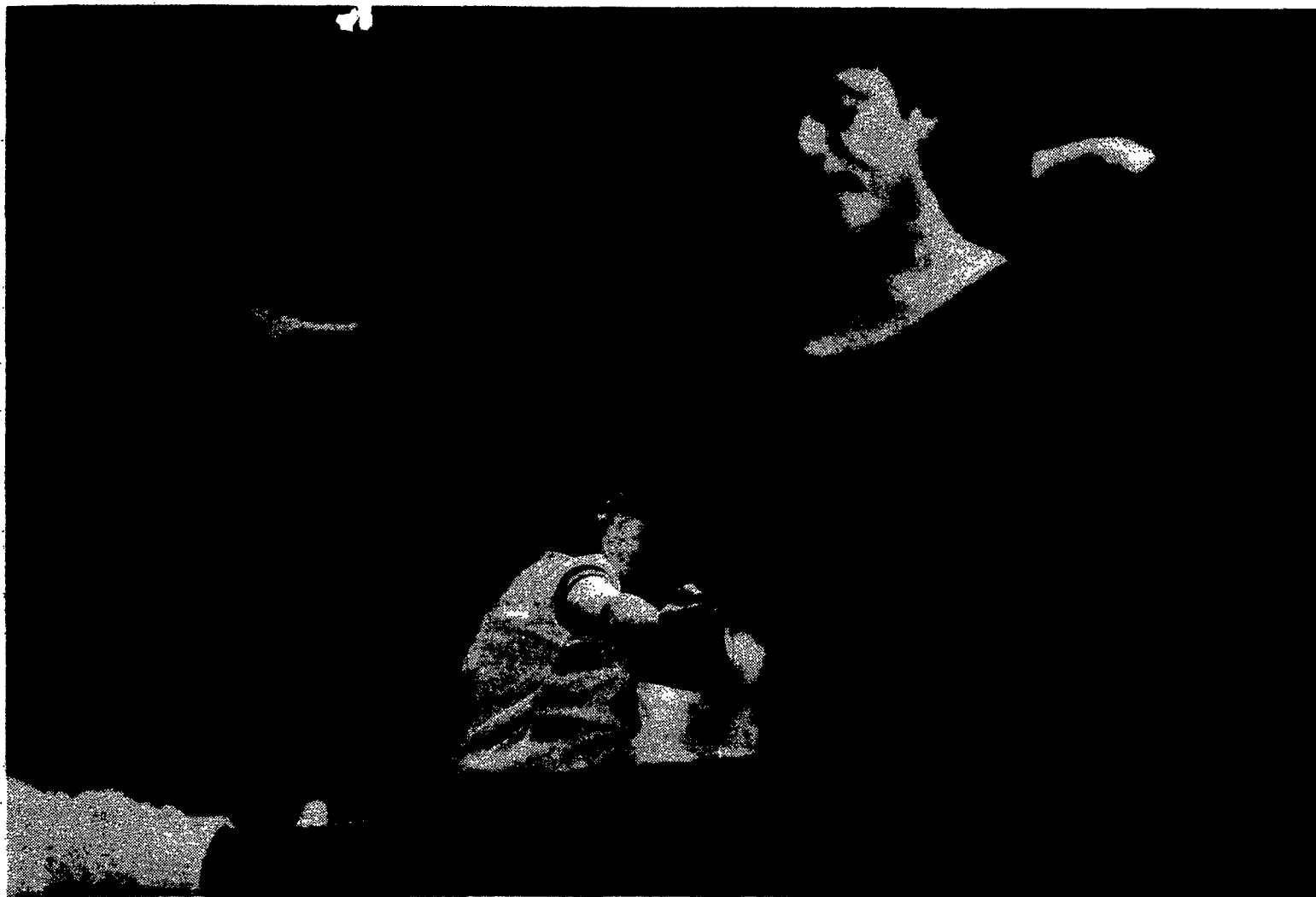


Academy's Dance Program Leaps Forward for Fitness



Sarah Grabowski looks admiringly at Mary Ellen Campbell, S.S.J. as they practice a routine on stage during dress rehearsal.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



Sister Mary Ellen Campbell waits stage left for her entrance in "Fame."



After the rehearsal was concluded, performers expressed their relief with mutual hugs.



In this time-exposure photograph, dancers are shown performing "Prelude," which was adapted from Garth Fagan's Bucket dancers.

By Emily Morrison

The music strides down an upstairs hallway above the convent at Nazareth Academy — driving, upbeat, energetic, yet somehow strangely disembodied in such a sedate-looking building.

That's the impression visitors to the 113-year-old girls' high school might come away with, unless they happen to stop at the doorway of the former chapel that currently does its best to contain the energy radiating from Sister Mary Ellen Campbell's dance and aerobics classes.

Mary Ellen Campbell, S.S.J., translates what the academy terms "the Nazareth spirit" into action, and the kinetic fireworks that result are so nearly palpable as to be almost contagious. Observers find themselves tapping their feet to the exuberant strains of such pop favorites as "Footloose" and "All She Wants To Do Is Dance," as Sister Mary Ellen warms up her aerobics class of Nazareth freshmen in a work-out that seems to take the ordinarily facile lyrics to heart.

Young girls in gym shorts and leotards stretch, plie, point, and flex in a valiant effort to keep up with their teacher's active demonstration of an amalgam of modern, jazz, and aerobic movement. Elements of Sister Mary Ellen's modern dance background are clearly evidenced by second-position floor stretches, flat-back arm extensions, turned-out leg lunges, and the almost symmetrical opposition of limbs. The kids stay with her, winded but radiant after 40 minutes of barely interrupted movement.

"The dance program is new to Nazareth this year," explains Sister Carol Cimino, director of development for Nazareth Academy. "This past year, only ninth and 10th graders took dance. Next year, dance will be required for everybody."

One result of a concerted drive to upgrade the quality of physical education at the academy, Sister Mary Ellen's fledgling program augments an established gym regimen that includes basketball, soccer, and a newly instituted track-and-field program.

"A lot of Catholic schools don't teach gym," says Sister Carol. "Some parishes are just starting to have sports programs, and a lot of kids come to us without any previous experience. We often have to teach them how to play basketball."

Catholic schools are noted more for team sports than for

such individual pursuits as track or dance, she adds, although that image is gradually being dispelled. Nazareth, she points out, began a track and cross country team this year as well, and has also added a weight room rigged out with mats, weight machines, barbells, and dumbbells.

"I think that the emphasis on bodybuilding and sports has really done a lot for the sports program, and for the kids' self-images, too," Sister Carol adds. "You go out of a class like this really feeling good about yourself."

Sister Mary Ellen concurs. "Girls this age have very different body types and levels of experience," she points out. "I've had to become aware of how very sensitive they are about body image. Kids also get frustrated when they can't do something right away. I try to make the movement as general as possible. Dancing isn't something you learn overnight."

Anyone offered a chance to watch Sister Mary Ellen in action would surely agree. Although she began her study of dance in her early twenties — considered relatively late in life for a woman who plans to make dance a career pursuit — she has clearly used the ensuing years to her advantage. "I started taking dance about eight years ago," she explains. "But it's been a very intensive eight years."

Sister Mary Ellen, a former music teacher with a bachelor of science in music from Nazareth College, began to perceive a real need for children to engage in some form of movement. She took her first dance classes at SUNY College at Brockport where, as she relates, "I never had a beginning class."

Her studies included a summer spent on scholarship at Duke University under the tutelage of jazz master Daniel Nagrin, as well as classes from Betty Jones (a principal dancer with the Jose Limon company for 25 years) and Nancy Meehan (former principal dancer with Eric Hawkins). She studied improvisation with Kei Takei and anatomy and kinesiology with Irene Dowd.

Additional classes in African jazz with Chuck Davis and Co., advanced studies in Afro-Caribbean technique with Bucket Dance Theatre artistic director and choreographer Garth Fagan, and performance classes with the Concert Dance Company of Boston have rounded out her dance training. She also includes liturgical dance, meditation, and prayer gestures in her repertoire.

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