

# 'Leap with joy': Jacksonville summer dance camp builds confidence, friendships, community

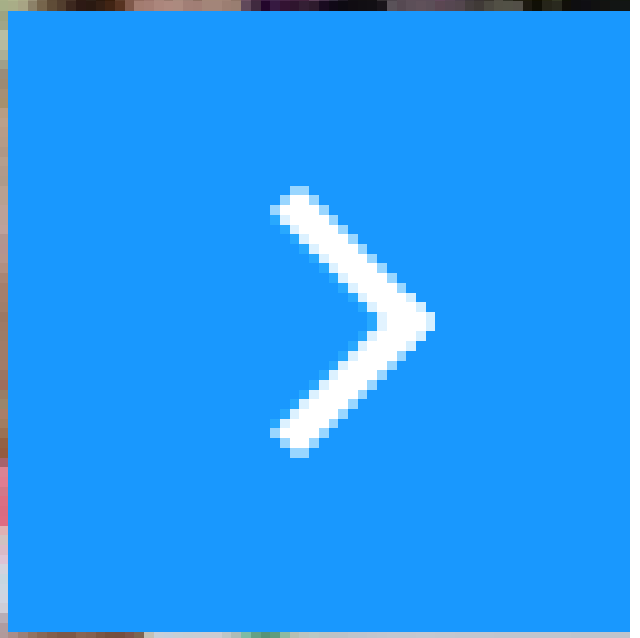
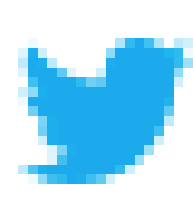
*Faith-based camp rebooting after 2020 COVID-19 layoff*



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Florida Times-Union

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## Kids learn steps, build confidence at Rakad Dance Camp in Jacksonville

Faith-based Rakad Dance Camp's goal is empowering young and not-so-young girls through dance.

Arianna "Ari" Howell has always loved to dance, and at 8 years old she very much wanted to go to a summer camp to do just that.

There were hurdles — the cost, since her father had been laid off from his job, and her life-threatening food allergies — but [Rakad Dance Camp](#) in Jacksonville cleared them all. Arianna received a scholarship, and camp organizers changed the lunch plans to accommodate her needs.

"Everyone was happy to make whatever changes necessary to keep Arianna safe," said her mother, Becca Howell. "I cried several times at the lengths they went to in order to keep her safe."

This faith-based camp is about far more than dance, said founder Leslie Oxford. The goal is empowering young and not-so-young girls through dance. Other participants have included a young girl with spina bifida who used a wheelchair and a longtime camper who is now 42 and has Down syndrome.

"Rakad is from the Hebrew word which means to dance or leap with joy," Oxford said. "We endeavor to teach our campers to dance and leap with joy. The dance steps are not always perfect but that is never the goal."

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Noa Loewen-Samuels (left), 6, Luna Malagna, 4, and other girls at the Rakad Dance Camp in Jacksonville perform steps they learned. The faith-based summer camp designed to empower young girls was founded in 2009. *Lawren Simmons/Florida Times-Union*

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Now 30, Oxford grew up in Orange Park and attended and was a company dancer at two dance schools there. She also was a member of the Orange Park High School Raiderette Dance Team and a dance intern for Jacksonville-based [YouthQuake Live](#), which bills itself as a "Christian version of Saturday Night Live created by teens to reach teens."

She started the camp in 2009 when she was 17 and leading the dance ministry at her church.

"God put it on my heart to have a dance camp for young girls, and I thought it would be a one-time thing. I wanted to leave the younger girls with dances before I left for college, and it grew into an annual camp," Oxford said. "The original goal was to share dances with my own church community. Now my goal is to share the art of joyful movement, the love of Jesus and female empowerment through the art of dance with all girls — that is, anyone who identifies as a female."

About 400 girls as young as 5 have attended the camp since, including nine the first summer. The 2020 camp was canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this year several mini-camps were held. Oxford hopes to be back to full capacity in 2022 and plans several outreach events prior to increase public awareness.

"It is special and unique," she said. "Growing up as a dancer, I went to a lot of camps and classes and I took the parts that I loved most and incorporated them into Rakad."



Oxford Provided By Rakad Dance Camp



Oxford, who works at nonprofit Mission House in Jacksonville Beach and recently obtained a master's degree in nonprofit management, designed a well-rounded daily schedule for campers.

"When campers come to camp in the morning, they join in Jazzercise to get everyone moving," she said. "We also teach dance technique and a full choreographed dance each day."

They also have snack time, small-group time, arts and crafts, community service projects, Bible verse memorization and games.

## Campers pay it forward

"Perhaps the most important part of camp happens in our small groups," Oxford said. "Teenage leaders joyfully and lovingly pour into our little campers all week long. The teenage leaders are all former campers, and I put a lot of time and importance on mentoring these young women."

Ari, now 14, kept returning after that first summer when she was 8 and is now one of those teen leaders.

"I came back because I felt wanted. I can be shy sometimes, but at Rakad I was able to talk willingly," she said. "I love teaching so I love being a leader."



Former camper-turned teen leader Arianna Howell helps line up the girls at Rakad Dance Camp to learn a new dance. *Lawren Simmons/Florida Times-Union*

Akice Agwa, now 23, was a camper in 2010.

"I was young and shy and it was a chance to get me out of my shell," she said. "I had never danced before."

She became a teen leader in 2011 and is now an administrative helper, providing behind-the-scenes support.

"I learned to embody the leadership tenets that Ms. Leslie taught us," Agwa said. "I could put myself in the shoes of the campers and it was easy to relate to them."

She also learned "community building," which she said helped her as a resident adviser at Florida State University and FSU's PeaceJam international education program.

Parent Lori Wurts' three daughters have participated in the camp, two beginning in 2015 and the youngest this year. Her oldest daughter, Elise, is a 2021 teen leader.

Wurts said she was particularly impressed with Oxford's mentorship program.

"I've watched my daughter mature under Leslie's guidance," she said. "She has high expectations for the leaders, and it's been a pleasure watching my daughter grow to meet them."



Teen leader Elise Wurts shows campers a dance routine at the Rakad Dance Camp in Jacksonville. *Lawren Simmons/Florida Times-Union*

Among Oxford's favorite camp moments are watching 6- and 7-year-olds evolve into camp leaders and seeing campers making friends.

"Parents and campers have said it is the highlight of their summer," she said. "They are always sad when it is over. Parents who have campers who are now leaders say that the mentorship ... is the most important part of Rakad because these teenage girls are learning essential leadership skills that include compassion, love, patience and inclusion of all."

The community service part of Rakad also is meaningful, Oxford said, with the camp holding diaper and school supply drives, among other activities. Campers "learn about those in need in our community and ways that even young girls can do their part," she said.

Every few years campers age 12 and up also have the opportunity to raise funds to take part in a summer mission trip to the Guatemalan city of Antigua. They help run dance camps for girls and support the outreach program led by a missionary family originally from Jacksonville.

Oxford was a missionary in her 20s. But even then Rakad was a priority.



Campers take a break at Rakad Dance Camp in Jacksonville, where they learn about dance, make friends and take part in community service. *Lawren Simmons/Florida Times-Union*

"All that I put into it — the time, energy, curriculum planning, budget concerns, dances, details, safety measures and spending my summers with teenage girls — is all worth it to see the impact on the lives of the campers," said Oxford, who is seeking federal nonprofit status for Rakad.

She said no one gets paid and they often work with a negative budget. However, no camper is turned away, she said, even if it means providing supplies out of her own pocket.

"At the end of the camp each summer, I am a mixture of relieved, sad and overjoyed that we've met our goals of empowering young girls to love themselves and each other," Oxford said.

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## RAKAD DANCE CAMP

The next camp will be July 25-29, 2022, at St. Peter's Episcopal Church, 5042 Timuquana Road, Jacksonville. The fee is \$60, but scholarships are available. To donate, sponsor future campers or get more information, go to [rakaddancecamp.com](http://rakaddancecamp.com).