

BURBANK LEADER

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Published Wednesday, August 2, 2006 8:05 AM PDT

Silver and gold on their toes

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Young dancers received a certificate, a shiny medal and a pink rose, but the real prize was improved self-esteem at Burbank School of the Ballet's third annual Performance Awards.

More than students performed choreography Sunday created by American Academy of Ballet's director Mignon Furman, an elegant figure in black chiffon who flew in from New York to evaluate their progress.

"Every child is judged on his or her own work, so they achieve their personal best. It is an opportunity for parents to see their young people dancing on their own as opposed to in a recital," Furman said.

Like the Olympics, the medals were bronze, silver and gold -- but no bronzes were given this day.

"The standard was quite outstanding," Furman said after the performances. "These are kids, but in some cases, they danced like young professionals."

Furman created the Performance Awards program at the University of Cape Town, with a fellowship from the Royal Academy of Ballet in 1984. All silver and gold medalists are invited to the annual Performance Awards in New York.

The routines are strictly classical and provide a standard for progress, said Lisa Sutton, artistic director for the school, 3008 W. Burbank Blvd.

"When it's time for the Performance Awards, my students are able to set a goal and feel that they can achieve that goal. It's magical," she said.

Sutton would like to see more art offered to children.

For Natalie Krakirian, 11, a sixth-grader at John Muir Middle School, the gold medal means she's one step closer to being a very good dancer.

"I've thought about being a professional since I was in kindergarten," she said.

Another gold winner was Marie Christine Gutierrez, 14, a 10th-grader at John Burroughs High School. Although dancing at the highest level, she was calm and graceful.

"I felt so used to doing it that I wasn't nervous this time," she said. "It was so much fun to perform. The medal to me represents another year of hard work."

Preparation for the awards cuts into parties, play-dates and piano lessons, but Sutton encourages participation for the lasting benefits.

"Even after the Performance Awards dissipate, the students will come through the door feeling so excited about what they've done and about each other," Sutton said.