



Transforming lives by teaching dance

Dance teacher **Summer Reber** leads a unique dance school for those with special needs – and it happens in her home church

IT'S the place where Summer Reber feels most at home – and where she transforms the lives of those she works with.

Summer leads a unique dance school for adults and children with special needs and disabilities, which meets at St Alban's Church in West Leigh. Each Tuesday and Saturday she and her volunteer team run the Identical School of Dance in its church hall.

Those with Down Syndrome, cerebral palsy and any other disability – including those in wheelchairs – are able to learn dance routines, express themselves and build confidence in their own ability through her gentle encouragement and high expectations. They can learn TikTok dances, act out big musical numbers or throw themselves into a Gangnam-style solo routine.

And for Summer, St Alban's Church is the right place to do this. She and her four children were baptised

there, her family grew up there, and she joins in Sunday services.

"This church and church hall have such memories for me," she said. "I've been part of this community since I was born, and it feels like home. It's where I attended Sunday School, and performed myself as a child. Everything I learnt about God and Jesus was in this church. And when my children ask questions about faith, this is where I hope they can find the answers.

'Everything I learnt about God and Jesus was in this church'

"But it's also a place where we share the same kind of values. I want this dance school to be a place where everyone is valued, there's no judgement, and where no one is looked down on because they are different. That's what I hope church is like as well."

Summer, who is now 26, grew up in West Leigh – her nan lived in St Alban's Road and she went to St Alban's C of E Primary and Oaklands RC School in Waterlooville.

At her secondary school, she had a friend whose brother had autism and she found she made a connection with him. That friendship was one of the things that inspired her and others to create the Identical School of Dance seven years ago.

"There wasn't anything like this for children or adults with additional needs," she said. "Mainstream dance companies do promote inclusion, but unfortunately do not always have the staffing required to cater for children's additional needs, although they try their hardest. At Identical, we remain small with many volunteers to support our dancers and we all equally shine!

"We want to show we're all actually the same – those with special needs

and those without. That's why we chose the name 'Identical School of Dance'. Here no one is different, we're all the same.

"Our motto is 'Believe, Achieve, Succeed' and we have that printed on our t-shirts. It's all about dancing to have fun, to build confidence and to make real friendships. Some of those who come to the dance school are now able to take part in school assemblies, or join in school discos or at birthday parties. They might never have done anything upfront before, but now they can. Or perhaps they weren't used to louder music and now they are.

"There was one young person who was signed off from physiotherapy because the dancing had helped with their mobility. And I remember one 17-year-old who said he previously had nowhere to go to make friends with people like him. Every week he wanted to show us a video he had found, so that became part of the session because it was important to him."

Each Saturday, Summer and her volunteers run an hour-long session for those aged three to 10 years ago, then another session for those aged 11 and over – including adults. The older group also meet on a Tuesday afternoon. They practice solo routines, as well as dancing in pairs and in groups. Some dances involve ribbons or other props.

Once every two years, they stage a big show at the New Theatre Royal or similar-sized venue. That usually involves a series of dance routines, but for their next show – to be held at Park Community School this autumn – they are planning to perform versions of the stage musicals *Matilda* and *Annie*. One of their members plans to narrate.

"I'm very happy to make costumes, and to be backstage, but I'd actually rather be their teacher than on stage myself," said Summer. "And I wouldn't be able to do any of this without the other volunteers. They help people to relax, sit down with



Above left: Summer Reber teaches dance routines; top and below: members of the Identical School of Dance enjoying themselves in St Alban's Church

them if they aren't able to continue, and make a real difference."

The Identical School of Dance also performs at the Christmas fair at St Alban's Church, which helps them to feel part of the worshipping community – and holds fundraising events at the Pallant, which is owned by St Faith's Church, Havant. However, the church and church hall in West Leigh do need some improvements so the dance school can develop its work further.

"We would love to have some mirrors on the walls, even if they were foldaway mirrors and not permanent," said Summer. "But they can cost thousands of pounds. It

actually helps the dancers if they can see themselves, and can see if everyone in the group is doing the same moves. We'd also love to use the stage here, so we can put on shows. But it has been condemned. We even know people who could do the work on the stage, but we need some funding."

If you are able to help with donations towards providing mirrors and redeveloping the stage at St Alban's Church, do contact the vicar, Canon Karina Green, on canonkarina@talktalk.net.

For details about Identical School of Dance, see: www.facebook.com/identicalschooldance