

Dance team becomes second family

By Jocelyn Syrstad
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER

When Karley Chism first arrived in Spain for her semester abroad, she found she was missing something — her sisters.

Chism is a twin, but that wasn't the relationship she was talking about. She was referring to the 26 other members of the Lionettes dance team.

Dance team members consider their bond with one another greater than just being friends. They see the team as a second family.

Senior Alexandra Costello even pointed out that nine of the dancers live together in a house off College Avenue, and many more are roommates elsewhere.

"It has been so difficult being away from the team and the girls this semester," Chism wrote in an e-mail. "Dance team has helped me create so much of who I am. My teammates are amazing. We are all like sisters. It's really tough not being able to dance and perform, which is such a passion of mine, and it's so difficult not to see all of my close friends everyday."

The dancers said the reason they have become so close is in part because of their tremendous respect for one another. The team

is self-run — meaning there are no coaches — so the Lionettes work together to ready themselves for performances and competitions.

At practices, one dancer will teach a dance to part of the team while the others sit against the mirror critiquing what they see, making sure the team is ready to perform.

All choreography and music is approved by the captains. The dancers are held responsible for cutting their own music and putting together their own moves and formations for every dance.

"We're all leaders on this team because we don't have a coach," senior captain JoAnn Esposito said. "When we all get in that room we all know we're there because we want to be there and not because someone's telling us exactly what to do. It's definitely shaped us."

While the dancers admit they work well together without a coach, it does come with some struggles and adjustments.

For freshmen and juniors of the team, it can take some time to get used to taking direction from their peers. Nearly all of the Lionettes were members of their high school dance teams or danced for their hometown studio prior to making the team.

Coming from that background, the dancers are used to following

the lead of a coach or an instructor. It is an adjustment nearly every team member needs to make their first season.

"It's a huge change in dynamic, because you don't have someone telling you what to do next," said junior Marisa Pollack, who joined the team after her freshman year. "It's all about your own motivation and determination to be the best dancer you can be."

Once the team members get over the initial shock of not having a coach, they are then faced with the struggle of having to discipline their own teammates.

The dancers don't see a lot of drama on the team, so disrespect and discipline isn't a huge issue — but it is something that can take them out of their comfort zone.

"It's very hard being in a captain position, because that team is literally my best friends," senior Erin Zoch said. "You have to get to a level where they respect you enough not to fool around but also remember there's a line of friendship. When you love each other, you respect them."

Though the Lionettes are without a coach, they do have a mom. Sue Sherburne, an academic advisor to the Lady Lions basketball team, acts as a voluntary advisor to the dance team. She has volunteered with the team since 1998.



Amanda Jo Cannillo, Marisa Pollack and Megan Highfill (from left) lead a cheer during the Lady Lions' home loss to Ohio State on Feb. 7.

Freshman Melissa Diehl said Sherburne is helpful to all the dancers and wants to make sure they are all OK. The Lionettes know they can turn to Sherburne with any problem they have — whether it's dance related or not.

"She's been a great go-between for them," said Penn State cheer-leading head coach Curtis White, who is also a close friend to Sherburne. "She oversees it to make sure it's all working out well, but she also gives them a lot of freedom to make decisions on their own. She's great for them."

While the dancers feel honored to have Sherburne there for them, the adviser is also proud to work with them.

She often boasts about the Lionettes' cumulative GPA of 3.6, which has stood for the past three semesters. She also is quick to mention the dancers are great role models for other young women.

"It's a really rewarding experience," Sherburne said. "I feel very fortunate to work with them. They're a great group of girls. It's a valuable experience, and I'm pleased with the fact that they all have a great overall perspective and that it's not linear."

The women see their experience on the team as rewarding as well. The bond they share with one another has helped them see success even without a coach, which

is unusual for a college dance team.

The result of their hard work was displayed at the National Dance Association (NDA) national competition last spring, when the Lionettes finished in fourth place. Pollack said that accomplishment, completed without a coach and as a family, brought instant tears and screams of pure excitement.

Doing everything on their own provides a sense of achievement for the dancers every time they step out to perform.

"We all come together and work," Zoch said.

"That's the most rewarding thing, just coming together and you feel the energy and want from every person on the team. We're all one big family, and everyone is dedicated to making us better and better."

Even those not members of the dance team admire the bond.

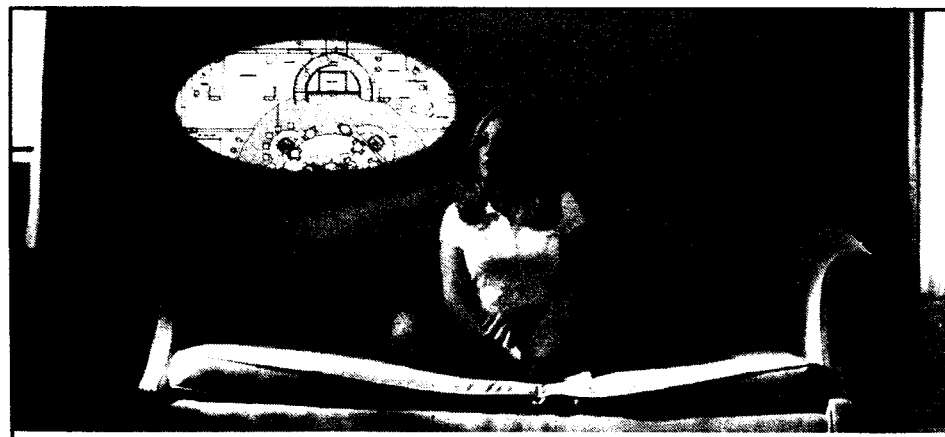
"I have two daughters who are 11 and 14," said associate athletic director for marketing and communications Greg Myford, who also works closely with the Lionettes. "When I look at these girls, I would like to think that I would be endlessly proud of my daughters if they turn out like these girls. I think that's the ultimate compliment you can give to someone."



Kayla Weaver watches her fellow Lionettes work on their kickline routine during practice on Feb. 4.

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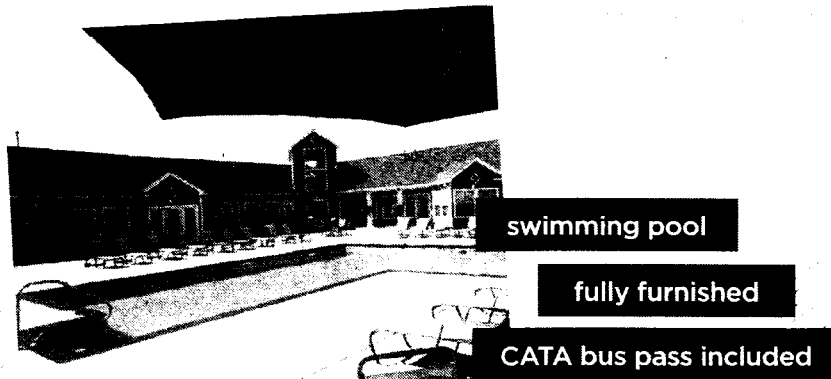
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