



She felt like an outsider in her own community and decided it was time to do something about it.

"I know what it's like to have kids and to be a family who are struggling to fit in and be accepted," she says. "I wanted my boys to feel like they were part of something, and to educate people on acceptance and inclusion."

Starting with a small school in Echunga, 34km southeast of Adelaide, in 2013, Ms Vassos introduced "tips and tricks" from her own experiences with applied behaviour therapy such as anger management and speech therapy into her classes, along with a teaching methodology that focused on the power of positivity.

Within three months she had 40 students; that jumped to 150 seven months later. Ms Vassos was soon running classes at Aldgate, Verdun and Nairne. Ferrying specialised equipment between sites was proving cumbersome, and when a purpose-built space came up in Mount Barker, Ms Vassos applied for – and won – a \$31,470 Fund My Idea state government grant to create a central studio. The space features fully sprung floors, tumbling mats, four swings that hang from the ceiling, a ballet barre and mirrors.

The studio runs traditional dance classes, including ballet, hip hop, jazz and lyrical, a breakdance class (run by a social worker), acrobatics, cheerleading and drama.

Rockit's Dance for Disabilities program

was developed with occupational therapists and includes the Launch Pad program and Diversity Dance Company for 12 to 20-year-olds. Siblings are invited to be part of the classes, along with role models who work together as a team on expressive dance or theatre, usually based on the theme of friendship and support.

Ms Vassos says the results of the program have been outstanding. "We've seen non-verbal students open up and start socialising, kids with anxiety learning to relax and reduce self-harm," she says. "These classes encourage them to make friends, to build strength and co-ordination, and socially through listening skills, working as a team and supporting each other."

"We don't see any of our kids as having a disability, but an ability." In our education system, teachers need to stick to a curriculum but not everybody learns in the same way. We say it's not okay for a child with a disability to stand clapping their hands while everybody else dances."

The school has expanded its

scope to target all ages. Its Nursing Home Program is aimed at providing therapy for people living with Parkinson's disease, MS and dementia and bringing older people together with the younger generations.

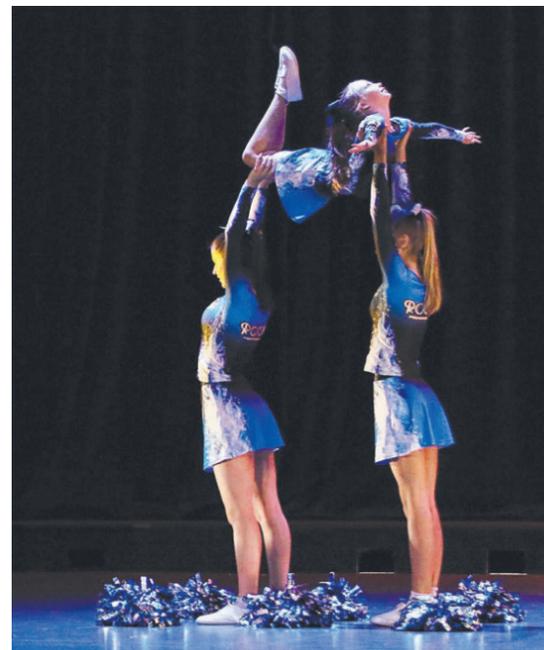
Rockit's Bridge the Gap Program, which connects kindergarten and school age children to residents in nursing homes, was runner-up in the 2016 COTA Positive Ageing Intergenerational Awards.

"The whole point of what we do is to use performing arts to help people feel better about themselves and to make people who are isolated feel that they are part of something bigger," Ms Vassos says.

And it's a philosophy that is working for parents like Ms Wegener, who says watching Georgia perform brings her family joy.

"When she is up there on the stage she just comes to life," she says. "It is such a precious thing to see this girl beaming with sheer delight, because she's free to be herself; it's not about what she can or can't do, it's who she is, and she just shines."

Rockit Performing Arts, 2/2 Hampden Rd, Mount Barker, rockitperformingarts.com.



Show stoppers

Members from the Rockit Performing Arts school in Mount Barker range in age, gender and ability. Picture: STEPH DEVLIN



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