

NONPROFIT

BY RACHEL ANDERSON HILL

## High achievers

*Children learn faith, focus and flexibility at Aim High Academy, a north Tulsa gymnastics training program.*

**A MESSAGE OF** hope adorns the brightly colored walls of a small gymnasium that is making a big impact in north Tulsa.

The message is the story of a boy walking on a beach who knows that he can make a difference in the world, even if it's just by saving a single starfish from dying on dry land.

This faith in the power of helping others is what motivated 37-year-old **Jennifer Patterson** to launch Aim High Academy, a nonprofit that offers gymnastics classes to girls and boys.

"God showed me a need for quality children's activities in north Tulsa," Patterson says. "And I know firsthand the benefits that come from being in a sport like gymnastics."

Little more than two years after opening its doors, Aim High Academy serves around 100 children ages 2-10 and has a waiting list in some age groups of eager families who want to enroll, says Patterson, who is affectionately called "Miss Jennifer" by her students.

One of those students is **Niesha Johnson**, who, at just 5 years old, is nearly a two-year veteran of Aim High Academy.

"When I started working with Niesha, she didn't know anything about gymnastics," Patterson says. "Now, she has progressed so much that she's going to local competitions and winning blue ribbons. She also has a lot of confidence for her age."

Niesha's mother, **Angela Johnson**, says she had always wanted to learn gymnastics herself, so when she heard about Aim

High Academy, she immediately arranged a visit. She was so smitten with the program that she enrolled Niesha that very day.

"After the first month, she had perfect form," Johnson says. "With Jennifer working with her, she'll go as far as she wants to."

Confidence and self-esteem are just a few of the benefits that accompany participation in Aim High Academy classes.

"They are learning lessons that they can take with them out into the world," says Patterson, who formerly coached at both Bart Connor Gymnastics Academy in Norman and the Tulsa World of Gymnastics. "They are learning discipline, focus, patience, goal-setting, work ethic and how to work as a team."

People in and around Tulsa are taking notice of Aim High and its students. The children have performed at several events, including half-time shows at The University of Tulsa and Tulsa 66ers basketball games. Some of the gymnasts also compete in local recreational leagues.

Aim High charges participating families a fee to attend class, although the cost is about one-third of an average gymnastics facility in the region, Patterson says. Families can enroll a child for just \$20 per month, and scholarships of up to 100 percent are available through the generosity of donors.

Aim High's small space is bursting at the seams with trampolines, balance beams, bars and vaults. Add a class full of students bedecked in leotards and bright smiles, and there isn't much room



**Five-year-old Niesha Johnson, working with Aim High founder Jennifer Patterson on the balance beam, already has shown potential as a gymnast.**

to tumble.

"My dream is to eventually have a full-size, fully functional gymnastics facility in north Tulsa for kids ages 2-18," Patterson says.

Her dream stems from the difference she knows she is making – one child at a time.

"It's a joy for me to be doing this every day," Patterson says. "I love to watch the children come in and achieve what they thought was impossible." ■

### Gold Medal Night

Benefiting Aim High Academy

**APRIL 24**

Silent and live auctions, entertainment from Nashville-based singer **Jason Eskridge**, special appearances by Aim High gymnasts and food from Just Catering by Orr.

Greenwood Cultural Center, 322 N. Greenwood Ave. Cost is \$60 per person. For more information, visit [www.aimhighgym.org](http://www.aimhighgym.org).