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Santa Ana's Saint Joseph Ballet changes name to the Wooden Floor

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People of a certain age know about the [Singing Nun](#), the Belgian singer-songwriter and religious order member who took "Dominique," her song in French about a saint in medieval Spain, to No. 1 on the American and worldwide pop charts in 1963.

In Southern California, the arts scene carries the legacy of a Dancing Nun. Santa Ana's [Saint Joseph Ballet](#) was launched in 1983-84 by Sister Beth Burns, then a member of the [Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange](#), and funded by the Catholic group. Now, the dance school dedicated to helping children from poor families choreograph their steps to a high school diploma and a college education has made a pirouette, changing its name to the Wooden Floor.

It may be one of those "huh?" names, says Melanie Rios Glaser, the company's executive and artistic director, who succeeded Burns, now a board member, in 2005. But there's a tradition of that in the world of experimental and cutting-edge art that the school now occupies. Rios Glaser cites the Mattress Factory, a contemporary art venue in Pittsburgh, the Kitchen in New York City, and REDCAT in downtown L.A., where the Wooden Floor will perform a two-night engagement in January. The name is inspired by the students' feelings about the school, Rios Glaser says. "The

studio floor has so much meaning for our kids. They become very eloquent about how they relate to it."

Two members of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange congregation -- they don't call it a convent -- attended the performance on Thursday in which the name change was announced in the middle of a dance piece.

Sister Katherine Gray, general superior of the congregation, said she's proud that the dance school has grown from its small beginnings as a ministry of her group, and that it's not important that the name reflect the school's roots, so long as its charitable work continues. "Anything that enhances that, we would support," she said. "It's still doing the work, and more, for which it began, and we'll continue to have a relationship of friendship."



Burns left the religious order in 1989 and is married and living in Los Angeles, according to Rios Glaser.

With the new name comes a new motto, "From here you can step anywhere." The school has about 400 students, ages 8 to 18, of whom Rios Glaser says about 90% are from families classified as "extremely low income" and "very low income" under housing aid guidelines set by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Although the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange provided initial funding for the school, it soon developed financial ties with an assortment of foundations and philanthropists, including the James Irvine Foundation and Weingart Foundation, whose grants sponsored the four-year long-term planning project that led to the name change. This year's budget is \$2.1 million, Rios Glaser said -- a slight belt-tightening from last year's \$2.3 million because of the recession.



"We're hoping that by having a name that begs the question, 'Who are you?' we will be able to improve our visibility," she said, the goal being "to grow our local impact and our influence on other communities to emulate the model."

Last week the school had 285 children audition for about 100 spots. The main goal is not to mold the next generation of dance professionals, Rios Glaser said, although a number of graduates have gone on to major in dance, and some alumni have made careers in dance. "I think there's a different measure for what we're trying to accomplish. What we like to brag about is our kids come out of here having been able to beat the odds, become the first in their families to go to college and break the cycle of poverty."

Among the perks, Rios Glaser said, are free tuition and room and board at Chapman University in Orange, Concordia University in Irvine and the University of Redlands for graduates of the dance school who meet admissions requirements; children who go elsewhere to college get four-year scholarships worth \$4,000 to \$10,000.

In reviewing Saint Joseph Ballet's debut at REDCAT in 2005, Times dance critic Lewis Segal found the performance a "needlessly brief" turn that "earned respect for its sense of discipline but much deeper admiration for allowing the spirit of childhood to speak. ... It's nice to know that some young dancers in our midst are having their skills and perceptions shaped by contemporary work -- the dance of their time -- and that the adults who teach them haven't forgotten the thrill of a young body discovering its life force by running through space as if all that energy and headlong rush toward the future would never end."

-- Mike Boehm

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Photos: From top, students practice in the Santa Ana studio of the Wooden Floor dance school; founder Beth Burns notes dancers' progress in 2001; Melanie Rios Glaser guides a student. Credits: From top, Kevin P. Casey / Wooden Floor; Christine Cotter / Los Angeles Times; Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

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