

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



## Wine guy has a taste for helping kids

By Lori Basheda, *Orange County Register*  
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**Event: Keep the Promise wine tasting**  
**Where: The Wooden Floor, 1810 N. Main, Santa Ana**  
**When: 6 p.m. Saturday Oct. 9**  
**Tickets: \$150 can be purchased at**  
**[thewoodenfloor.org](http://thewoodenfloor.org) or call 714-541-8314 x124**

If you had told him when he left Michigan back in 1972 and headed west in a used Oldsmobile that he would someday host one of the best wine tasting parties Orange County has ever seen, he would have laughed.

For one thing, back in '72 he had only ever tried wine once, at a college party. And it was the famously cheap Boone's Farm Apple Wine, which left him in a bad way, so he had no intentions of ever trying wine again.

For another, when he climbed into the Olds that day, and waved goodbye to friends and family, he had a measly 300 bucks in his pocket, and everything he owned fit in the backseat.

Yes, he had a master's in finance from Michigan State, but there was no job waiting for him here, just the promise of sunshine.

"Yet knowing how way leads on to way," as Robert Frost wrote, the road that John Markley chose that day back in '72 has in fact made all the difference, not just

for him, or Orange County wine lovers, but also for countless hard-luck kids.

Markley was 24 when he arrived in LA with a resume that listed his last job as the head of gift wrap at The Big Store in Grand Haven, Mich. He soon landed a job with Union Bank. Real estate was slumping at the time and his job was to travel around the country, swapping real estate assets for debt. Every few days he found himself in a new city; Chicago. New York. Miami. Atlanta.

"At night I made sure I ended up at a good restaurant," he says. "Instead of giving me a bonus, they let me spend money on nice restaurants. That's when I fell in love with wine."

Markley left Union Bank in '83, but 20 years later, an old Union colleague told him he wanted to introduce him to Saint Joseph Ballet in Santa Ana. At the time Markley's wife, Janice, was working with an Orange County ballet company (which no longer exists), so Markley thought he would check out the competition for her.

It turned out Saint Joseph Ballet wasn't a ballet company at all.

Founded in 1983 by a nun named Beth Burns, it started out as an after school dance class for underprivileged kids in Santa Ana. Burns was with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, hence the name. The class was held in a church basement in Santa Ana.

That first year, 15 kids signed up. But as word spread, the number of kids grew, and so did the vision.

Saint Joseph Ballet is now called The Wooden Floor. It has a \$2.2 million annual budget, a 21,000-square-foot studio in the museum district of Santa Ana and a director who is a Fulbright Scholar, Kennedy Center Fellow and graduate of Julliard.

This year 375 kids are enrolled. They arrive after school, do their homework with the help of tutors, and then take various dance classes, from modern to ballet. There are also workshops on nutrition, finances and child rearing for participants' parents.

When auditions are held each October, kids begin lining up outside the building at 5:30 a.m. Most still come from Santa Ana. They are selected based on their passion for learning dance and their family income (the average comes from a family of five living on \$29,000 a year).

The Wooden Floor's philosophy is this: "In the dance studio, rigorous training, creativity and self-knowledge

lead to confidence, leadership, teamwork, well-being, and joy."

Markley was so impressed with what he saw that he accepted an invitation to be on the board. When his three-year commitment ended, he could see only one problem: The program was so successful it was outpacing its funds. The Wooden Floor promises scholarships to kids who go on to college. And in the last five years, 100 percent of the graduating seniors did just that. In fact, 104 alums are now attending college, from Wellesley to NYU to Boston College to UCLA.

"I'd never seen anything like it," says Markley, who's been involved with other non-profits. "I don't want to belittle those, but God when I found this one, I just can't believe the success they have."

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Markley's favorite thing in the world is seeing kids get an education. His other favorite thing is wine.

"In Orange County, when there's a wine tasting, usually it's not very good wine," he says. And yet: "God there's a lot of wine lovers out there. If I could provide wine they've never tasted..."

His first Wooden Floor wine tasting party was a low-key event; he spent \$12,000 and turned it into \$35,000 for the program. The second year, he took it up a notch, hunting down wines with scores of 90 and over. Word spread, and last year, nearly 200 discerning wine drinkers showed up, raising \$74,000 for the program.

For this year's Keep the Promise party, set for Oct. 9, Markley has spent \$21,000 on 360 bottles of wine, 6 reds and 6 whites, all rated from 92 to 96 points by Wine Advocates or Wine Spectator. He also checks ratings online from the Newport Beach home he shares with his wife and daughter Madeleine, a Corona del Mar High junior. If he sees something he likes, he's either on the phone or in his car, tracking it down, whether it's in OC, LA or San Diego.

He recently read a Wine Advocates review by Robert Parker that compared a Kongsgaard chardonnay to "drinking liquid stone." Markley hunted down a bottle, poured a glass, "and I went 'wow.'" He then dialed a friend who owns a winery in Napa and had him buy three bottles of the wine from a store that was selling it up there for \$98 a bottle. It's stashed for the 2012 party.

In fact, he already has all the reds picked out for the parties through 2014, not a single one below 95 points, and all the whites for 2011 and 2012. He positively glows when he talks about the 2009 Bordeaux, comparable to an '82 vintage, he has stashed for 2013.

But Markley is no wine snob. The party starts off with a blind tasting, and this year he threw in two inexpensive chardonnays, both of which score 92 points but only cost \$22.

"It's fun to see if they can tell the difference from the \$130 bottle," he says. "I've been burned so many times."

Whoever has the most correct guesses wins a half a case of wine. But really everyone who attends will be a winner, Markley says. Half way through the night a dozen Wooden Floor kids will step out to meet the people supporting them.

"These kids pick themselves up and make it happen," Markley says. "It blows me away."

