

The Wooden Floor Raises the Ceiling

Students credit Santa Ana-based dance studio with instilling work ethic to guide them into college.



Itzel Guerrero, left, 18, from Sage Hill High School and Edith Delgado, 18, from Santa Ana High School, both received scholarships from Wooden Floor, a Santa Ana-based nonprofit aimed at helping low-income students, to attend UCI in the fall.

By Rhea Mahbubani

June 6, 2013 7:37 p.m.

Itzel Guerrero can't imagine her life without the Wooden Floor. She tries to picture it sometimes, but fails. Most likely, she doesn't want to.

So many experiences during her 18 years have taken root in the nonprofit's Santa Ana campus, she admits.

Growing up in a household where her older sister Elideth was a gymnast — an expensive undertaking — Guerrero recalls there being no resources for her extracurricular activities.

When she was 9, her parents took their friend's advice, introducing their daughter to the world of dance with a hunch that she might enjoy it. Turns out, they were right.

For the past nine years, Guerrero has spent, on average, six hours per week training — a number that has increased to 20 with performances at Irvine Barclay Theatre, Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Concert Hall (REDCAT) and the group's own Studio Theatre.

"Less than being a dancer, being a part of the Wooden Floor has impacted me," said Guerrero, who lives in Orange. "It has opened doors to so many opportunities, as cheesy as that sounds."

The Wooden Floor, which is in its 30th year, works with 375 youths ages 8 through 18 in the hope of using dance to transform low-income communities across Orange County.

According to Dawn Reese, executive director and co-chief executive officer, Sister Beth Burns, a Catholic nun and trained ballerina, founded the Wooden Floor as a healthy and safe environment to keep kids off the streets. Initiated as a summer pilot project, it quickly gained traction when Burns homed in on the power of dance and joined it with academic and social services support.

The new name of the organization, which was called the St. Joseph Ballet Company until 2009, reflects the "foundation provided to each student as a launching pad for [his or her] success," Reese said. Now, 53 classes per week run for 42 weeks of the year, exposing students to classical ballet and modern choreography, improvisation, composition and more. An estimated 3,000 elementary students are also offered Dance Free Weeks — a community engagement program with public schools in September and October.

"We set high expectations for the students in the studio, in the classroom and in life," Reese said. "The teaching style is nurturing and at the same time rigorous. Our goal is to provide hope, opportunity, life skills and mentoring to help economically disadvantaged students realize their potential."

Leading classes limited to 25 dancers allows faculty members to "develop a meaningful relationship with each student," she said.

Guerrero, who was recently accepted to [UC Irvine](#) — news that merited jumping and dancing around her room — knows that her path to college was paved with help from her "family" at the Wooden Floor, which provides free help with college research, financial aid, scholarships and even SAT preparation.

"I got help with my SAT prep, which, if I hadn't come here, my family would have had to pay for," said Guerrero, who now plans to study civil engineering. "I probably wouldn't have been able to take the course."

The Wooden Floor's five faculty members and four accompanists guide youths from Westminster, Huntington Beach, Orange, Anaheim Hills and even Riverside. Santa Ana and Tustin constitute 82% of the student body, Reese said.

With the help of private, individual, corporate and foundation support, the Wooden Floor is represented at 132 colleges nationwide, including [New York University](#), [Cornell University](#) and [Southern Methodist University](#), as well as those that fall under the UC and Cal State systems.

"We believe that dance really has the ability to shape and change the way students think about themselves and the world around them," Reese said, adding "positive self-image," "critical thinking" and "team work" to the list of benefits they gain.

Guerrero will be cheered on by family and friends when she graduates from Sage Hill School in Newport Beach on Friday with a GPA probably over 4.0. She received a scholarship to attend Sage since the eighth grade.

She is also looking forward to a ceremony at the Wooden Floor on June 14, a chance to be surrounded by several dancemates whom she counts among her closest friends.

One such example is Edith Delgado, who, like Guerrero, received a scholarship from UCI and the Wooden Floor.

Delgado, 18, from Santa Ana, remembers hearing about the Wooden Floor at Dance Free Weeks when she was in the fourth grade at Herbert

Hoover Elementary School. After that, there was no turning back.

“Earlier, I was sort of a tomboy — I played soccer in the Little League,” she said. “When I got here, it changed who I was. I was also very shy, and then I opened up as a person.”

In the years since, she has been forced into a balancing act with classes, homework and dance, and not one could be dropped.

“Time management is a primary skill I've gained here,” she said. “It's a really good asset to carry into college because I know I'm going to have to do the same there.”

The soon-to-be Santa Ana High School graduate will pursue environmental engineering beginning in September. She stumbled across this interest early on, since her mother often said, “Hurry up, the water is going to run out,” when she showered. Now a fan of conserving water, she wants to educate herself and solve global water issues.

She is also toying with the idea of minoring in dance.

Delgado is excited to be a freshman amid a diverse student body and experience the transition to college life. She knows she can't take anything for granted, though.

“Around my neighborhood, people usually go to high school and drop out,” she said. “I didn't do that. Being at the Wooden Floor kept me grounded and away from bad influences and crowds. I'd leave school and come to my home here.”