

Hundreds Audition for Dance Program



October 20, 2013
By Kendra Albaza

SANTA ANA – First, they made energetic introductions that showed off signature moves. Then, they froze in place in silly positions. Before they knew it, the children were dancing like “seaweed,” moving their arms and legs in a swaying motion as if being carried away by wind.

Santa-Ana based nonprofit after-school dance organization The Wooden Floor teaches dance that focuses less on strict routines and more on creativity. This way of thinking, organizers say, teaches skills such as teamwork, creativity, self-awareness and the ability to find joy in one’s life that help young children succeed later in life.

At The Wooden Floor’s annual auditions Saturday, more than 350 children auditioned for one of about 75 spots in its all-inclusive dance program.

Children accepted into the organization’s rigorous dance program also receive academic tutoring and college and family counseling through high school, often free. It ensures students from low-income families get the support they need to graduate high school and enroll in a college or university.

Many families lined up hours before the organization’s 8:30 a.m. audition start time, some arriving as early as 2 a.m. Evangelina Aguas of Santa Ana arrived at 3:30 a.m. with family friends and their children to ensure her son Cesar, 9, landed an early audition. Aguas already has a daughter in the program.

“It is really good for their future and the best opportunity in their lives. We have to get it,” Aguas said. “It is the best program I’ve ever known in Santa Ana. It will help with their self-esteem and develop skills in dance, art and academic achievement.”

In the studio, instructor Liz Hetzel asked children to roll, skip, march and clap across the dance floor. Cesar, who looked unsure of his movements but smiled through the audition anyway, said his sister, Linda, inspired him to try out for the program.

“I feel excited and happy” when I dance, Cesar Luna said. “I want to learn new skills, and earn a full scholarship for college. I want to be a lawyer.”

The nonprofit, formerly known as Saint Joseph Ballet, started in 1983 as a summer program for low-income youth. The organization extended to a dance program at local schools called Dance Free Weeks in 1985 before owning a downtown Santa Ana office with one studio in 1989. The organization moved to its latest 21,000-square-foot home with three studios off 19th and Main streets in 1999.

Co-CEO and artistic director Melanie Rios Glaser said she enjoys evaluating the auditions because it gives her a chance to get to know the children.

“For some of them, it is the first day of the next ten years,” Rios Glaser said. “It can have some wonderful surprises.”

According to the organization, it has a track record of sending 100 percent of its graduates to college since 2005. The privately-funded organization has also won plenty of awards, including an Afterschool Innovator Award from the Afterschool Alliance and The MetLife Foundation last year.

The school teaches ballet, modern, improvisational and some African dance. Study tables and rooms filled with computers, books, tutors, counselors and academic advisers are also available to the organization’s 375 students. The organization also teaches another 3,000 students in 12 to 14 Santa Ana and Tustin schools during its Dance Free Weeks workshops each fall.

Iran Gomez, 11, was back at the dance studio Saturday for her second audition after she tried out for a spot in 2011. Gomez, who lives in Riverside, said she wants to be a professional dancer or artist. Her family arrived at 2 a.m. to secure her audition.

“I tried again because I love dancing and I want to enter this school,” Gomez said. “My dad has a store around here. “I am usually doing homework but I am not busy for the whole day. I wanted an activity.”

Dawn Reese, Co-CEO and executive director of the organization, said The Wooden Floor’s board of directors voted in 2009 on a 10-year plan to look at the growing, local impact of the organization and its potential to expand. She said they, “don’t have anything definitive,” yet.

In the meantime, Reese said students that have gone through the program are change agents in their communities and would positively affect future generations. Some alumni of the program, now college students, volunteered at Saturday’s auditions.

“These kids are becoming beacons of hope for the community,” Reese said. “They are starting a ripple effect.”



Juan Carlos Salazar, 8, waves to his mother after auditioning at The Wooden Floor's annual audition day Saturday. The Wooden Floor, an after-school dance program, has a track record of sending 100 percent of its graduates to college since 2005.



Nayli Jijon, 10, waits for her turn to sign-up for auditions during the Wooden Floor's annual audition Saturday in Santa Ana.



Instructor Drew Olvey, second from left, leads a group of hopefuls during warm-ups at The Wooden Floor's annual audition day Saturday.



Nayli Jijon, 10, center, rises up on her toes during The Wooden Floor's annual audition day Saturday morning in Santa Ana.



Kids waiting in line to audition peer into The Wooden Floor's annual audition Saturday.



Nayli Jijon, 10, auditions for a spot at The Wooden Floor, an after-school dance program in Santa Ana that has a track record of sending 100 percents of its graduates to college since 2005.



Natalie Rivera, 10, dances during her audition for The Wooden Floor, an after-school dance program in Santa Ana.



Antonella Cardenas, 11, high fives volunteer Roland Acosta during auditions Saturday for a spot at The Wooden Floor in Santa Ana.