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Step by Step for 30 Years at The Wooden Floor

By Karli Komoto
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After a long day at school, some students might dread the thought of attending an afterschool program. But that's certainly not the case for those at The Wooden Floor, an organization aimed at kids from low-income families that combines dance, academics and college planning to lead them on the path toward success.

The Santa Ana group serves 375 students every year, using artistic immersion as a means to instill confidence and creativity. Artistry is combined with mentoring, academic counseling, college preparation and family-support services to promote long-term success and advancement, said Nathan Lammers, communications and marketing associate for The Wooden Floor.

The organization's rigorous schedule and abundant opportunities, Lammers said, fosters responsibility and time-management skills in its students.

"A lot of kids say they didn't like having to do the extra stuff after school," Lammers said, "but once they get into high school they realize how beneficial we have been to their development."

As students get older, said executive director Dawn Reese, the mentoring becomes more intense. And time in the dance studio allows kids to engage in abstract thinking, creativity, and team building.

As The Wooden Floor reaches its 30th anniversary, it is celebrating a 100 percent high school graduation rate for its students for the ninth consecutive year. This means a 100 percent graduation rate for the three children of the Valdovinos family, all of whom participated in the program and are attending or plan to attend a university. Youngest son Bryan is the most recent graduate.

"Dance has affected Bryan in a lot of ways," Reese said. "He is willing to take that leap forward (to attend college away from home) because he has developed that confidence in himself."

Similarly, Bryan's sister, Blanca, who graduated from high school in 2007, said that during her time at The Wooden Floor, dance helped alleviate the stress from school. She was introverted during high school, she said, but The Wooden Floor gave her an outlet that inspired her to obtain her goals.

"Dance mentally rejuvenates you. It gave me confidence that I could go out and conquer my dreams," Blanca said.

Bryan, who was involved with his high school's dance team, said that the ballet and modern dance classes at The Wooden Floor taught him to pick up choreography easily.

"They taught me to never give up when things get hard," Bryan said. "Before I would dance, but not with the same charisma I have now."

The Wooden Floor's strong emphasis on academic counseling helps it maintain its 100 percent graduation rate, Reese said. By their junior year, students are being guided through SAT prep, college tours and the college application process.

Bryan's brother, Robert, a 2008 graduate, said he took full advantage of The Wooden Floor's college preparation opportunities, which helped him achieve acceptance into the University of Rochester in New York.

"I was able to take SAT classes ... for free," Robert said. "Getting to use that resource definitely helped prepare me."

Reese said that students at The Wooden Floor stay with the same counselors, from elementary through high school, which adds stability, especially when kids have to change schools or neighborhoods.

For Robert Valdovinos, The Wooden Floor became like a second home over the years. His counselors were not only there for him academically, but also socially, he said.

"It was a great resource, especially since my parents were so busy," he said. "They acted like my second parents, and I cried when it was (my counselor) Resurgio's last day."

Without The Wooden Floor, Bryan said, his siblings would not be where they are today. After graduating from the University of Rochester, Robert enrolled in the Warner School of Education. Blanca is currently in medical school at the University of Rochester after graduating from Cornell University and was recently honored as a Minority Scholar by the American Brain Foundation and the American Academy of Neurology.

Now, Bryan will follow in his siblings' footsteps as he pursues a higher education at Cal State East Bay in the fall – thanks to the support from The Wooden Floor.

"The Wooden Floor created an atmosphere of a family while at the same time pushing and guiding us towards success and college," Bryan said. "I am so grateful."

