



Nonprofit Choreographers Future to Reach Kids Across US

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by Kate Schwartz

Santa-Ana based nonprofit organization **The Wooden Floor** is taking a new approach to growth, recently licensing its unique curriculum to Washington, D.C.-based **CityDance**.

It offers contemporary dance instruction for students from third grade until they graduate high school, and couples the after school activity with tutoring and family services.

The Wooden Floor's board of directors resolved in 2009 to commit significant time and resources to strategic expansion, something that hadn't been an official priority since its founding in 1983.

The group was founded by **Beth Burns** of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange and was originally called Saint Joseph Ballet. It operated out of the basement of a local church and grew slowly at first but began to see significant changes more than 10 years later.

Saint Joseph Ballet changed its name to The Wooden Floor in 2009, paying homage to the dance studios where students spent countless hours practicing and performing.

The organization's board, through private donations, funded the construction of a 21,000 square-foot building with the capacity to serve about 400 students. It was completed in 1999 and still serves as The Wooden Floor's headquarters. The building includes three dance studios, corporate offices, and space to tutor and mentor students and their families.

The space gave The Wooden Floor room to grow—today it has 16 full-time staff members. But in 2009 its board of directors, which includes Orange County business people such as **Pacific Investment Management Co. Executive Vice President and Deputy General Counsel Arthur Ong** and **SVA Architects Chief Executive Ernesto M. Vasquez**, decided it needed a more definite expansion plan.

They brought on businesswoman **Dawn Reese** to meet the challenge. "Nonprofits in general were at a point where they were realizing they really needed very strong-minded business executives, just like any for-profit corporation did," Reese said. "Someone who is focused on driving performance, strategic planning, and ensuring impact-driven results."

Reese came to The Wooden Floor as general manager and chief financial officer after working for many years in the software and technology sector, as well as stints in corporate consulting. She was promoted to executive director and co-chief executive in 2012.

"My role was to help develop a strategic plan to determine where we want to be in the next 10 years," Reese said. "And it was clear one of our objectives was to grow."

The Wooden Floor's business model is unique and lends itself to the kind of growth Reese had in mind. It aims to break the cycle of poverty through a long-term dance immersion process combined with academic support, college and career readiness programs, and family services.

AUDITIONS

The nonprofit holds rigorous annual auditions of third-grade students from Title I campuses—federally funded schools with large concentrations of at-risk or low-income students—in the Tustin, Santa Ana, and Garden Grove school districts. About 400 students turn

out for the two-day tryouts, which include dance auditions and personal interviews. Only 70 students are awarded spots.

“During the auditions, we are really just looking for enthusiasm and willingness to learn and be taught, so it’s really difficult to have to make those decisions and turn so many students away,” Reese said.

Selected students begin what is hopefully a 10-year journey, attending after school dance classes, on-site tutoring sessions, and eventually ending up in the “college pipeline” starting in sixth grade.

The pipeline, as The Wooden Floor calls it, offers students college tours, SAT preparation, and college application assistance.

“It forces our students to think beyond just middle school and high school,” Reese said. “Most of these kids will be the first generation to make it past high school, and maybe even middle school, so these resources are crucial.”

The Wooden Floor uses the arts, and specifically contemporary dance, to mentor students during an extended and impressionable time in their lives. It says that since 2005, 100% of participants enrolled in higher education immediately after graduation.

“We see the real impact these programs have on the students and their families in Orange County, and we decided to take real steps to expand that impact, both here in Orange County and on a national scale,” Reese said.

“We sat down and looked at various successful nonprofit organizations and tried to figure out how we wanted to execute the expansion of our impact. There were tons of options—franchising, licensing, and just plain giving resources away for free. I knew I wanted something that kept us nimble, that allowed for growth with minimal overhead and oversight.”

Reese decided on a licensing model but said she knew a lot of work had to be done to make it a reality. She met with partners at Costa Mesa-based law firm **Rutan & Tucker LLP**, which agreed to perform the necessary legal work on a pro-bono basis.

The Wooden Floor then began the undertaking of transferring its curriculum, theories, and intellectual property into tangible resources that could be disseminated to other nonprofit groups looking to imitate its model. It trademarked and copyrighted the materials and drafted a licensing agreement with the help of **Rutan & Tucker**.

Licensees—so far, there’s one—pay a three-month fee for startup costs and training, followed by periodic

payments for renewable three-year terms. They are responsible for raising their own funds, and The Wooden Floor doesn’t provide governance or assistance beyond the materials and initial consulting.

Reese said she hopes to eventually make the resources available to licensees on a Web-based portal.

Money gained from the licensing program isn’t the point, she said.

“We want to recoup hard costs and the expense we spend on implementing the new programs, but we aren’t charging for our institutional knowledge or the years we’ve spent developing the curriculum.”

The Wooden Floor also resolved to be very particular in choosing its first partner—it had to be nearly identical in culture and objectives to The Wooden Floor’s.

CITYDANCE

CityDance seemed to be a good fit. The organization has provided dance education to at-risk youth since 1996 and approached The Wooden Floor in 2013 about adapting its curriculum. CityDance signed the licensing agreement in November and plans to roll out the new model in phases over the next few years.

“With The Wooden Floor’s innovative and proven model, CityDance moves closer to achieving our vision of a thriving DC arts community, where every child, regardless of socioeconomic status, has access to the benefits of a robust arts education and where world-class dance is available to all,” **CityDance Executive Director Alexandra Nowakowski** said in a news release.

Reese is enthusiastic about the strategic steps The Wooden Floor is taking to expand its impact but is taking the expansion slowly. The organization doesn’t have plans to take on more licensees for now and instead wants to focus on CityDance as the D.C. group implements the curriculum.

Reese said she’s even more excited about the lives the organization is changing in Orange County and beyond.

“Some people want their stock options, but my reward is knowing these kids’ lives are changed in extraordinary ways because of what The Wooden Floor offers them. And what’s even better is that now this organization will touch the lives of kids I’ll never even meet or know across the country. That thought keeps us all going here.”