

Santa Ana's The Wooden Floor Changes Lives, Families and the Santa Ana Community



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By Cathi Douglas

For 30 years, Santa Ana's The Wooden Floor has provided inner-city, at-risk children and teenagers with the tools they need to succeed in school and in life through a unique approach grounded in dance.

Since 2005, 100 percent of The Wooden Floor's students have graduated high school on time and gone on to pursue higher education – a rate three times the national average for their socioeconomic peers. The Wooden Floor's Executive Director Dawn S. Reese and Artistic Director Melanie Rios Glaser create an environment where students change and grow themselves, positively influencing their families and their community.

Founded in 1983 by then-Sister of St. Joseph Beth Burns as St. Joseph Ballet, The Wooden Floor provides low-income children a way to build confidence and develop a sense of discipline and success. It offers free academic programs, pre-college mentoring and college scholarships to ensure that students become college-ready. Early remedial support is given to each of the 375 students so that they develop the skills necessary to be academically competitive.

The Wooden Floor provides tutoring and homework assistance in the Hutton Education Center free of charge for each student, thanks to partnerships with UC Irvine, Chapman University, Cal State Fullerton and Cal State Long Beach. While many of the program's students come from academically challenged schools, The Wooden Floor's all-campus GPA has risen from 3.0 to 3.2 since 2009.

When Burns, who had a background in dance, first founded St. Joseph Ballet, it was her personal ministry to serve

downtown Santa Ana's community. She wanted to provide children with a world-class education and arts opportunity knowing that personal growth through dance could help individual students and the community.

Today, students from 8 to 18 years old study in a rigorous, 10-year program that sometimes requires them to be on site up to seven days a week. Students are selected in a once-yearly process, with 400 children lining at 2 a.m. on screening day. About one in four is selected.

Reese said Maria Elena came to The Wooden Floor when she was 9 years old and attended for 10 years. Upon graduation from high school, Maria Elena became the first of her family to attend college. She will graduate from UCLA this month with a bachelor's degree in math and biology and plans to attend medical school to become an orthopaedic and reconstructive surgeon. Not only is Maria Elena a success – she influenced her brother and father. Her brother is going to college and her father remains an enthusiastic community volunteer at The Wooden Floor.

"The Wooden Floor students' pursuit of higher education ripples through their communities," Reese said. "Their energy inspires parents and neighbors to work toward change and soon entire communities have been transformed. Unleashed by their journey at The Wooden Floor, students utilize their kinetic energy to create a positive difference in the world around them."

The Wooden Floor's upcoming 32nd annual concert, "A Light Comes Through," takes place May 28-30 at the Irvine Barclay Theater. The performances are made possible by a result of pairings from November 2014 to May with several well-known professional choreographers, including John Heginbotham – a 2016 U.S. State Department Cultural Ambassador – who work in residency with the students.

"Performing for an audience changes the way they look at themselves and the world around them," she added. "Preparation and performance teach them skills they will use in all facets of their lives." Audience members are transformed as they witness firsthand the dramatic change, empowerment and improvement in students' lives.