


FIELD REPORT

PROFILES OF INNOVATIVE WORK

 Dancers perform "What is Too Strong for Breaking," choreographed by Mark Haim, at The Wooden Floor Annual Concert performance in 2008.



Dance Revolution

The Wooden Floor is licensing its successful model of using arts education to break the cycle of poverty.

BY KATHY O. BROZEK

Suppose you lead a very effective but small nonprofit dedicated to helping disadvantaged local youth attend college. You want to scale your innovative program, but you worry that you will lose the tight-knit and fluid connections you have achieved between your organization and the community. What should you do?

Eight years ago, The Wooden Floor (TWF), a nonprofit based in Santa Ana, Calif., faced this dilemma. That is when its leadership, in deliberations about its strategic plan for the next decade, confronted the key question of how to grow its model beyond current operations. For more than three decades, its arts-based program has addressed systemic poverty through youth development, empowering children and teenagers to achieve academically by committing them to a rigorous dance regimen. Every student

who completes TWF's curriculum goes on to college, and is usually the first person, or generation, in their family to attend.

TWF's leadership team decided that they had a responsibility to share the TWF program but preserve the effective execution of its local operations. It was serving less than 1 percent of Santa Ana children eligible for the program, and local funders needed assurance that their donations would be utilized for operations nearby, not across the country.

"We wanted to remain nimble and flexible locally, and be sure national growth would not create excessive overhead," CEO Dawn Reese says. So TWF decided instead to disseminate its comprehensive, high-touch model by using a licensing partnership agreement with other nonprofits, by which TWF provides consulting and other critical services to implement the program over several years. The terms of the licensing arrangement ensure that all licensee fees will cover the related costs, so that locally sourced funds will not be used elsewhere.

"We provide each licensed partner with The Wooden Floor in a Box: consulting, training, and curriculum to implement our program model for a license fee," Reese explains. "In this way, organizations can function independently under their own governance, financial, and branding structures."

The first licensing partner initiated contact with TWF in early 2013. CityDance DREAM, a nonprofit located in Washington, D.C., had been teaching dance in multiple genres to underserved youth since 2005. The licensing agreement was signed in November 2015, after a comprehensive vetting process to assess whether the nonprofit had the leadership, financial, and programmatic capacity to execute the model.

"Licensing can create immediate impact in a partner's community, as they work alongside TWF to implement our strategies which lead to student success," Reese says. "We help them learn how to talk to students, families, and supporters to understand the importance of the 10-year journey."

RIISING TO THE BEST

Founded in 1983 by Beth Burns, a former Sister of St. Joseph's Catholic order, TWF began as Saint Joseph Ballet, a pilot dance program to serve at-risk children. It operated out of a one-room 1,200-square-foot space until 1999, when, after raising \$6.8 million to fund building construction and an endowment, it moved to its current home of 21,000 square feet. In 2005, the year that Burns retired as CEO, TWF achieved its longtime goal for the first time: All of its students went on to college after graduating from high school.

TWF continues to help youth reach their full potential and boasts a 12-year track record of 100 percent college enrollment among its students, most of whom are of Hispanic descent. Capacity-building grants from major foundations in 2006 and after have been critical to deepening and expanding TWF's service offerings.

At the core of TWF's program are highly disciplined ballet and modern dance classes, built on an eight-to-10-year commitment from the students and their families. The frequency

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and length of the classes increase with the age of the child, starting at two classes per week and increasing to five, continuing through the 12th grade.

“Students express emotions through dance, including school-related frustrations,” says Jennifer Bassage Bonfil, a dance faculty member since 2006. “We see that movement helps them change their outlook and opens up conversations, increasing their potential for success.”

TWF provides comprehensive academic and emotional support to improve the overall well-being of the students and their families: individual counseling sessions for each child’s emotional development; family counseling services to assist parents and children; social service referrals to other organizations; workshops on health, parenting, and financial issues; and college readiness programs to bolster academic skills and performance.

One of TWF’s guiding principles is: *We believe that if our students are provided the best, they will rise to the best.* The custom-built structure that houses TWF reflects this sentiment, starting with a lobby filled with Latin American contemporary art. The three professional-quality dance studios range from 1,700 to 2,000 square feet, and each has one mirrored wall and shock-absorbent oak floors.

Unlike other youth dance performance programs, TWF does not focus on technical ability for acceptance. “We take into account coordination and potential for dance—do they enjoy moving?” Bonfil says.

Currently, 375 students are enrolled in TWF. This has made admissions extremely competitive. In recent years, approximately 400 candidates have auditioned for only 75 spots, with families lining up many hours in advance for a chance to participate.

The highlight of the year is TWF’s annual concert, an event produced by outside choreographers who are leaders in modern dance to create a high-value artistic production. It is a pivotal experience for the students as they showcase their dance abilities, honed by more than 100 hours of intensive practice, in a formal theater setting over three days of performances. Up to 200 students are typically cast

each year, and each must meet GPA, behavioral, and attendance standards to take part.

Academic achievement is integral to the program, and is consistently reinforced by TWF staff and a myriad of offerings. For example, third to eighth graders can attend five-week workshops covering critical topics—reading, math and science, or test-taking skills—which are offered year-round and meet twice a week. A focus on long-term goals intensifies once students reach the sixth grade. They are invited to career nights featuring community members, and join discussions about academic diligence and its impact college and career choices.

Once the students enter high school, an array of college-related curricula becomes available. Classes include SAT and ACT test preparation, college and career search assistance, financial aid workshops, and interviewing skills. To help defray the costs of attending college, TWF awards scholarships ranging from \$4,000 to \$10,000 to approximately 80 percent of its alumni. Since 2005 (its first year of formal data tracking), 245 students have completed the TWF program and proceeded to college.

Providing such a rich and holistic program is not inexpensive. Financial sustainability has been a cornerstone of TWF’s model, and total expenses for programs and supportive activities for fiscal year 2015 were \$2.6 million, or a cost per student of approximately \$6,900 annually. The funding sources are diverse: Individuals provide 60 percent, foundations 30 percent, and corporations 6 percent; and 4 percent is earned income. The endowment is currently \$3.4 million. Ninety-six percent of the students pay no fee to attend. TWF sets clear expectations for the parents at the audition and throughout the year: All parents are asked to volunteer their time, purchase concert tickets, and donate supplies for the concerts.

SHARING THE MODEL

Washington, D.C.’s CityDance DREAM used to be solely an after-school program for

third to fifth graders at six public schools. But the students expressed strong yearnings for it to continue to middle school, and this prompted expansion.

“In the past we have offered ad hoc academic support to our students,” explains Kelli Quinn, founding director of CityDance DREAM. “Now, through our partnership with TWF, we have a strategic initiative of a proven model of success and TWF’s mentorship to guide us.”

CityDance DREAM is currently in the midst of a \$9 million capital campaign to build a permanent facility in Washington, D.C., and significantly expand programming. The building will allow for increased enrollment, and will include dance studios, a theater, an education center, and counseling offices.

“The licensing model helps us with fundraising and family orientations. We can show everyone how we plan to grow—financially and programmatically—through our partnership with TWF, a time-tested and successful model,” Quinn says.

As for TWF, its local efforts remain strong. A second Santa Ana studio, slated to open in late 2017, will accommodate 100 new students, all of whom will be selected through the audition process. The location is within the Depot at Santiago workforce (low-income) housing complex currently under construction, a new project that will provide apartments for families who meet income and other requirements. The developer, who is impressed with TWF’s program, has agreed to provide 3,000 square feet of ground-floor space to TWF rent-free for at least 10 years, and without any governmental subsidies.

Breaking the cycle of generational poverty is a complex proposition. TWF’s youth program has achieved extraordinary results, and its highly intensive and comprehensive service offerings cover nearly every aspect of successful child development. Now its positive impact can be replicated in other communities, and TWF-inspired dance programs will uplift and give many more youth and their families a meaningful pathway to a better life. ■