

# TAKING THE FLOOR

It's all eyes on Falon Baltzell as she leads one of O.C.'s most beloved cultural centers into the next era.

By Jerry Hicks // Portrait by Jay Reilly



Falon Baltzell has danced her way across America. From Hawaii to New York, her footwork has found its way into festivals, concert stages, museum galleries, workshops and dance films. And now, the Mississippi native has found a permanent home in Santa Ana, where she's making leaps and bounds as artistic director for The Wooden Floor ([thewoodenfloor.org](http://thewoodenfloor.org)), a nonprofit dedicated to utilizing dance as an integral part of education for children of low-income parents. Here, Baltzell's first act.

**When did your love of dance take root?** When I was 5 years old, I was standing in my living room and Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation" [was on TV]. I turned to my mom and said, 'I want to do that!' I have had a 27-year love-hate relationship with dance, as most artists do, because the art is demanding on the spirit, body and mind. Choreographer Seán Curran once told me, 'You are not your body, but your body is your art.'

**What led you to The Wooden Floor?** I was residing in Hawaii... and I needed to experience the magic of [the islands] before transitioning into another full-time position. I was impressed with The Wooden Floor's commitment to each student's 10-year journey. Since 2005, 100 percent of our graduates have immediately enrolled in higher education. This is more than double the national average for their socio-economic peers. I teach modern technique classes twice a week to various levels of students. Each student has a life story, and every child matters.

**It sounds as if you've found your calling.** [There are] so many joys—from teaching our students and collaborating with staff to working with choreographers and witnessing the growth of our organization.

**What's next?** Our second location within the Depot at Santiago recently opened to serve nearly 500 students. We want to continue our ultimate goal: to break the cycle of poverty through generational change.