

# Making Room on the Wooden Dance Floor

**NONPROFITS:** How St. Joseph nun started movement for success

■ By SUBRINA HUDSON

Fewer parents will be camping out the night before auditions at Santa Ana-based nonprofit **The Wooden Floor**.

That's because the hugely popular youth development program can now admit an additional 100 students each year, thanks to a second location at the mixed-use project **The Depot at Santiago** in Santa Ana.

Still smelling of fresh paint, the 4,000-square-foot space opened this month, and the nonprofit is already searching for a third location. Until its recent expansion, Wooden Floor could accept only about 70 students out of the 400 applicants it receives every year.

Chief Executive **Dawn Reese** said the board of directors made a concerted effort in 2014 to grow its local presence through a four-year comprehensive funding campaign.

"Our goal is to serve more," Reese said. "If our third location is in Santa Ana, we're looking to be a connected campus model. If they are within one mile, all students can flow through all the locations without us incurring a lot of additional overhead."

Wooden Floor offers ballet and contemporary dance instruction, after-school tutoring, and family services to students from third grade until they graduate high school. It serves nearly 500 students, all with financial need, and they must audition to show an aptitude for dance.

Over time, Wooden Floor has attracted top-tier OC executives and companies to its cause and its counsel, such as Board Chairman **Arthur Ong** of **Pacific Investment Management**

Co., Treasurer **Judith Posnikoff** of **Pacific Alternative Asset Management Co.** and board member **Ernesto Vasquez** of **SVA Architects Inc.**

Adding a second location is a big step for the 35-year-old organization, made possible through a partnership with Tustin-based developer **C&C Development**. Wooden Floor didn't incur any expenses and receives free rent for 10 years under the condition that it offer family counseling services and workshops to residents at the Depot.

It has 27 employees an operating budget of \$3.4 million. Its operating expenses per its latest audited financial statements for fiscal 2016 were just shy of \$3 million. It's in the midst of a comprehensive capital campaign that includes donations toward its campus expansion and growing its estimated \$5 million endowment.

Reese said it plans to announce the amount raised this week at its 35th anniversary celebration event at Irvine Barclay Theatre.

C&C Development Principal **Todd Cottle** said it often partners with local organizations or service providers when building affordable housing projects, citing Santa Ana-based nonprofit **KidWorks** and **Lighthouse Learning Centers** as examples.

"It's just a good model," Cottle said. "Our focus is providing quality affordable housing and a good, safe place [for] residents that help make a lifestyle change. The impact [Wooden Floor] makes on the entire family is what's wonderful about this partnership."

## Jumping Ahead

The Depot location features a large dance studio, an education center and a counseling office.

Services offered at its 21,000-square-foot



Let's dance: students practice at The Depot at Santiago location

Main Street campus are also available at the second site, according to Reese.

"It was really important for us to make sure that wherever the students are, all the services that wrap around them [follow]," Reese said. "When a child needs us, we can't have them go through extra steps to be served, so anytime we grow, we grow with the wraparounds that support the student's journey outside the dance studio."

The organization's grown significantly from its humble beginnings.

Founded in 1983 by **Beth Burns** of the **Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange**, it operated out of a local church's basement before moving to its headquarters in 1999. It changed its name in 2009 from Saint Joseph Ballet to The Wooden Floor.

Reese said it's known for its dance programs, but its focus is to help build a student's confidence and get them to pursue higher education, adding that most students study engineering, medicine and business as opposed to dance.

Since 2005, 100% of its students graduated from high school and enrolled in institutions such as **Boston College**, **New York University**, the **University of California-Irvine** and **Wellesley College**. About 80% of the Wooden Floor alums receive scholarships of \$4,000 to

\$10,000 paid through its annual operating budget.

Its effectiveness is in good part the result of the dance school's relationship with parents and students, one that can span more than 10 years. There's an understanding among the parties that all admits will work toward being Wooden Floor alums. About 40% of students stay until they graduate high school, Reese said.

It also offers workshops for parents from mental health services to financial literacy.

"I always tell people it's not a lack of love, it's a lack of knowledge in helping their children navigate higher education," she said.

The expansion comes three years after it announced a licensing partnership with Washington D.C.-based nonprofit **CityDance**. The group operates independently with its own board of directors but uses Wooden Floor's curriculum.

Reese said it still plans to license its curriculum nationally and is in talks with three organizations but is treading carefully so as not to jeopardize its expansion efforts in Orange County.

"Our families already have so many challenges in life," she said. "We have to remain stable for them. So the organization has to be really forward thinking and thinking 10 years out to make sure families feel taken care of." ■



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