

# THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



*Kimberly Martinez, 8, does free-style dance as she auditions for a spot in The Wooden Floor after-school dance program on Saturday. The class is open to low-income children ages 8-13 who have a love for dance*

## Hundreds audition for afterschool dance program

The Wooden Floor promotes dance and education for low-income youth

By Jaimee Lynn Fletch  
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SANTA ANA – A damp and drizzly morning didn't deter about 400 youths from waiting in line for an audition to secure a spot at The Wooden Floor.

Some families started lining up at 10 p.m. Friday and hundreds showed up in the early morning hours Saturday for a chance to gain acceptance to an after-school dance program open to low-income Orange County residents.

The privately-funded program started 30 years ago in the basement of a church with a handful of students, and it has grown to a high-end facility on Main Street serving about 375 students, organization officials said.

Saturday's auditions were open to students 8-13 and those who get in will stay until they graduate from high school.

In addition to dance classes, The Wooden Floor offers tutoring and counseling as well as college scholarships for graduates.

Melanie Ríos Glaser, artistic director and co-chief executive officer, said her eyes welled with tears as she saw the line of parents holding umbrellas and children in heavy jackets wrapped around the building Saturday.

Out of the hundreds who audition, The Wooden Floor will take between 75 and 100 students.

"It's very moving to me to see so many families lining up so early and seeing all the eager faces," Ríos Glaser said. "The fact that we can't take them all is hard, but we're glad we can help so many at the same time."

Tustin residents Esperanza Valdez and her daughter, Destiny, 8, arrived at the studio on Main Street at 4 a.m.

"If it's to help my daughter, I'm there," Valdez said of waiting in line for hours. "This is a great opportunity to help her out with her self-esteem and make new friends."

Destiny hopes she will be chosen for the after-school program that teaches modern dance and ballet.

"I love to dance," she said. "I like moving and action."

Melissa Yanez, 11, said she has been dancing for several years and her favorite style is hip-hop.

"I'm very into dancing," she said. "I love the movement and the energy you feel inside."

It is this love for dance and not technical ability that is necessary to be a student at The Wooden Floor, Ríos Glaser said.

The students filed into a courtyard where they were given a number to pin to their shirts.

Gabriela Ojeda, 13, sat on a bench outside the dance studio quietly resting her chin in her hand, waiting for her group to be called.

Ojeda and 29 other dancers were led into a studio where they learned their audition routine.

They wiggled and writhed while shouting their names. They bent their knees in a first position plié before rising up on their toes to hold and balance in eleve.

The dancers skipped across the floor and rolled in a ball along the side wall of the studio.

They pretended they were seaweed; flowing and moving with the water before being flattened by a rough wave.

And finally, they went "Gangnam Style".

The familiar song filled the room and the dancers immediately started to laugh and bounce around.

The students knew exactly how this routine went. They galloped in place and swung their arms overhead twirling an imaginary lasso.

They performed the same set of routines for Ríos Glaser and others who will decide which students will be accepted at The Wooden Floor.

When Ojeda finished her audition, she tied her shoes with a big smile.

She said she wasn't nervous about her performance.

"My favorite part was the seaweed because you get to move," she said.

Those who don't make it this year, will be encouraged to try again next year because engaging in dance is a unique way to grow socially, academically and physically, Ríos Glaser said. "There is so much learning involved," she said. "If they can learn to master their bodies they can learn to master other things in life."



Melanie Rios Glaser, Wooden Floor artistic director and co-CEO, left, and Kristy Santimyer-Melita, a member of the board of directors, evaluate children auditioning



Nelly Cantu holds her son, Jose Martinez, 2, as she waits more than two hours with daughter Karla Gallardo, 10.



Dance instructor Bert Fulton, center, guides children through a series of exercises during the annual Wooden Floor auditions day in Santa Ana on Saturday.



Children wave to their parents as they get ready to audition.



Children introduce themselves in a creative way during annual auditions at The Wooden Floor.



About 400 low-income families lined up in the rain, some as early as 10 p.m. the night before, to audition their children in The Wooden Floor.



Edith Delgado, left, and Tania Murillo offer encouragement to dancers auditioning



Children introduce themselves as they audition at The Wooden Floor.