20 shining students
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by Dr. Jim Burns

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Like many Orange County kids, Josue Murillo spent time as a young boy on the soccer field. In high school, he made the wrestling team. But where this 16-year-old Tustin High School junior will tell you he feels most at home is on the dance floor.

Murillo is a student at The Wooden Floor, a nonprofit after-school program in Santa Ana that gives underserved kids the chance to learn a new skill while improving their grades, their health and their lives — all through the power of dance.

What began in 1983 as the Saint Joseph Ballet, a summer pilot program founded by Beth Burns, a sister with the Sisters of St. Joseph order, is now an award-winning year-round program. Celebrating its 30th year — thanks to the support of corporate partners such as JP Morgan Chase, Bank of America and the Anaheim Ducks — The Wooden Floor (thewoodenfloor.org) has an annual operating budget of more than $2.2 million and serves 375 students and their families each year.

While the name may have changed, the organization’s mission remains the same: use dance to empower local youth to break the cycle of poverty. Orange County boys and girls ages 8 to 18 from low-income families can become involved in a demanding program that provides hope for a better future through dance training, as well as access to academic assistance and family services, completely free of charge or for a nominal fee.

The results have been life-changing. Since 2005, 100 percent of the graduates from The Wooden Floor have not only completed high school on time but also have continued their education, compared to 35 percent of their non-dancing socioeconomic peers.

Each fall, two-day auditions are held for what has become a limited number of coveted openings. In October, more than 400 hopeful kids lined up to try for 75 spots at The Wooden Floor’s 21,000-square-foot facility.

As a fourth grader, Murillo stood in a similar line. He had no dance experience, but he did have a love of movement and the desire to follow in the footsteps of his big brother, Luis, a former Wooden Floor student. Today, Murillo realizes how his commitment to dance has shaped his life.

“Dance relieves the pressure of a tough day at school and helps me stay focused,” he says. “Being here helps me manage my time. My grades are better. This is a place where I can be myself. And I’m looking to the future.”
It all starts in the dance studio, where the kids are coached to realize their full potential. The Wooden Floor’s Dance Education Program offers more than 50 classes in ballet and modern dance six days a week, most with live piano and percussion accompaniment.

Students are provided with the necessary dance attire and are taught by faculty members who clearly teach more than just steps.

Rebeca Ramos, a faculty member since 1998 and a former dancer with the National Ballet of Mexico, understands that her role extends far beyond that of an instructor.

“Dance, like any art, is a great tool,” Ramos says. “It teaches discipline, concentration and problem solving. It allows the students to create and connect with their souls.”

Faculty members such as Ramos team up with internationally renowned choreographers and other collaborating artists to provide the students with an even richer experience.

Each spring, a number of the student-dancers are invited to perform in the annual concert: it’s a chance for the kids to help choreograph and showcase what they have learned and share it with families and friends.

“The approval of peers and family is so important to these kids,” Ramos says. “They get to see firsthand the beauty of accomplishment.”

Allison DeLeo, who spent 10 years in the program, remembers how incredible it felt being on stage. A self-described “shy and awkward child,” she knows that being involved with The Wooden Floor opened doors that she’d never imagined.
After graduating from high school, she studied engineering at Northern Arizona University. Now back in Orange County working on her single- and multiple-subject teaching credentials, DeLeon has returned to The Wooden Floor as a part of its Academic Services Program, which provides tutoring, financial-aid training and college-preparation classes.

"As a tutor, I want to give back," DeLeon says. "I want the kids to see that they can be something."

Executive director Dawn S. Reese, who serves as co-CEO along with artistic director Melanie Rios Glaser, says The Wooden Floor recognizes that when the child does better, the family does better.

"From Day One, we want the parents and the students to commit to being in this together," Reese says. Parent workshops in leadership, nutrition and communication skills, as well as in-house crisis intervention offered through the Family Services Program, help more than the young dancers.

Maria Cirese, who currently has three children enrolled at The Wooden Floor and is a parent representative who serves on the organization's board of directors, tried to articulate in Spanish through an interpreter -- and her own tears -- what being a part of this extraordinary program has meant to her kids and her family.

"My kids are doing so well, in school and at home, and they have so much opportunity ahead of them," Cirese says.

A sign on The Wooden Floor's building at 19th and Main streets reads, "From here you can step anywhere."

Cirese and her kids believe that wholeheartedly.

Says Cirese: "I don't ever get tired of saying, 'thank you.'"