DANCE CLASSES were in session during a May 12 grand opening ceremony at the Wooden Floor at Depot at Santiago to debut a second location less than one mile from its flagship campus. The program aims to help low-income students.

Santa Ana-based the Wooden Floor presents 35th annual concert

The nonprofit has served thousands of low-income Orange County youth for nearly four decades.

BY RICHARD CHANG

Unifying Catalysts. That’s the name of the Wooden Floor’s upcoming 35th annual concert from Thursday through Saturday at the Irvine Barclay Theatre.

For nearly four decades, the youth-serving nonprofit arts organization has helped thousands of Orange County kids benefit from the Wooden Floor’s dance programs, as well as its academic, college and career readiness tutoring.

“Our approach to dance is about challenging children to think about the world around them in very complex ways,” said Dawn Reese, chief executive officer of the Wooden Floor. “They learn how to collaborate, how to critically think. They test themselves in the studio. They learn about themselves. They sometimes succeed, they sometimes fail. They seem like they take that courage into all parts of their life.”

Founded by Beth Burns, then a sister with the order of St. Joseph of Orange, the Wooden Floor was originally known as Saint Joseph Ballet. It started as a summer pilot dance program for at-risk youth. The organization changed its name to the Wooden Floor in 2009.

Today, the Santa Ana-based organization helps nearly 500 children per year with its innovative, long-term dance, academic and social-emotional programs and strategies. Students typically enter when they are in third or fourth grades, and stay until they graduate from high school. Since 2005, 100% of Wooden Floor students have graduated from high school and enrolled in higher education, according to Reese.

Participants generally come from low-income families of $35,000 per year per household, Reese said. About 96% go through the program free of charge. Others pay a nominal tuition of $20 to $70 per month. The Wooden Floor is supported by individual, private and family foundations, in-

IF YOU GO
What: “Unifying Catalysts,” 35th annual concert by the Wooden Floor
When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Saturday
Where: Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine
Cost: $20 general, $50 benefit seating, which includes a $30 tax-deductible contribution; $10 for children 13 and younger and students
Information: (949) 854-4646 or visit thewoodenfloor.org

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Mark Haim, an NEA and New York Foundation for the Arts awardee, will work with 60 dancers, who will perform “Cavalcade,” set to orchestra and chamber music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Amy O’Neal of the National Performance Network and the National Dance Project, has choreographed a piece set to rhythmic, futuristic soul music. “Unafraid” focuses on street dance and reflections of the community.

“Our faculty are all professional dance educators and they’re also artists,” Reese said. “Every year, we bring the top choreographers together with our students to co-create a new work. The students are very involved in the artistic process.”

Prior to the Friday performance, a black-tie dinner is planned to help raise funds for the Wooden Floor. Tickets start at $350. A free, preperformance chat with the cast and choreographers is scheduled for 6:45 p.m. Saturday.

RICHARD CHANG is a contributor to Times Community News.