



No Barre to Achievement



Orlando Ballet's collaboration with Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida aspires to ignite young imaginations.

BY G.K. SHARMAN

You never know where you're going to find artistic talent.

Take Misty Copeland, for example, the first African-American woman to be named principal dancer for the American Ballet Theatre.

In 1996, she was living with her divorced mother and several siblings in two small rooms in a motel in Gardena, California, south of Los Angeles. Encouraged by the coach of her school drill team, 13-year-old Copeland went to a free ballet class at the local Boys & Girls Club.



COURTESY BGCCF (ALL)

She didn't even dance at first — she just watched. But when she finally participated, her talent was unmistakable. Her dance teachers and mentors helped her work and improve.

By 2000 she was part of the ABT Studio Company, the ballet's second company, and the following year she became a member of the main corps de ballet.

Both Shane Jewell, executive director of Orlando Ballet, and Gary Cain, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida (BGCCF), invoke Copeland's name as an example when talking



Orlando Ballet launched its collaboration with BGCCF in June 2018 with the Disney, Levy-Hughes and Universal clubs. The partnership has expanded to seven clubs across Central Florida.

about a recent collaboration between the two organizations.

They aren't expecting to find the next Misty, but both emphasize that kids can't follow in her ballet-slipped foot-steps if they haven't been introduced to the art form.

"We have a lot of very talented children," Cain says of the kids who take part in the various club programs. "But their talent may go undiscovered if they never get that exposure to the arts."

In other words, you can't dream the dream if you don't know it's there — and that it's a possibility for you.

Stepping Into Their Own

The effort, part of the ballet's Scholarship Training for the Enrichment of Primary Students (STEPS) program, aims to make ballet accessible to those kids.

"At the ballet, we believe that every child from any walk of life should have dance education," Jewell says. "And we feel very strongly that if a child wants dance training, we should provide it."

The STEPS program, modeled after a similar effort pioneered by the Dance

Theatre of Harlem in New York, focuses on introducing several classical ballet styles to second- and third-graders. Sessions take place in schools and community centers. The STEPS Ahead component accepts fourth- through eighth-graders.

The collaboration between the ballet and BGCCF, which began just more than a year ago, takes the effort further. Starting with two club locations, it has now expanded to seven sites across Orange, Seminole and Osceola counties: Joe R. Lee Branch, Tupperware Branch, Disney Branch, Universal Branch, Altamonte Springs Branch, Sanford Branch and Levy-Hughes Branch.

Additional expansion is planned as budget and teacher availability allow, Jewell says.

Regular sessions, held during fall and spring semesters, consist of 13-week residencies — the ballet's term for sending teachers out to the various locations. Classes are held once a week for about 90 minutes. Each site accommodates about 50 youngsters. The ballet also offers a one-week summer session.



A December 2018 performance at BGCCF's Levy-Hughes Club celebrated the partnership among Dr. Phillips Charities, Orlando Ballet and BGCCF.

Auditions are held during the first three weeks, but — with the exception of kids who might pose a discipline problem — everyone who wants to participate is accepted.

The teachers are artists themselves. Many have had careers on Broadway, in ballet or in film and TV, or done casting for major productions such as Cirque du Soliel, cruise ships or touring shows.

Not only are sessions free for the kids, the girls also get leotards, tights and ballet slippers. Boys receive shorts or sweatpants, T-shirts, socks and ballet slippers.

“It makes them feel special,” Jewell says. “They receive a ‘uniform’ and feel part of something.”

At the end of the program, the kids offer a free performance for the community and also receive American Ballet Theatre Level 1 certifications for their participation.

Orlando Ballet and all of its classes, including outreach programs, are affili-

ated with ABT, Jewell explains. It’s one of five such ballet schools in the nation. Both the preprofessional and outreach classes at the Ballet use the same curriculum as the New York ballet training program.

Community Collaboration

The collaboration between the ballet and BGCCF grew, in part, out of a desire to bring more performing arts opportunities into the club’s offerings.

The club likes to say that it works with children but builds adults by promoting academic success and healthy lifestyles and building character and leadership. Overall, the organization serves 15,000 kids a year at 35 locations in seven counties.

Clubs tend to be located in neighborhoods that, on average, rank low in household income and high in incarceration rates. Families may pay nothing or a nominal fee for children to attend club activities.

“I can’t sing the praises of the ballet enough,” Cain says, adding that the STEPS program offers the kids an exciting new set of role models and ways to build their confidence.

Charmaine Hunter, a ballet teacher and director of community enrichment for the ballet, agrees.

“We’re bringing the arts to the community,” she says. “Without access to the community, we’re not giving these young people the tools to fly. We’re not giving them the tools they need to be successful in life.”

In the end, the ballet program is really a vehicle for exploring creativity and expression, Jewell says.

“We’re providing that access, that vehicle, that opens a way to seeing the world and ignites their minds and their hopes and dreams.” **OAM**

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