

Times OC

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Courtesy of the Wooden Floor

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 chil-

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

dren 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-

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CONCERT

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cluding the Weingart Foundation and the Surdna Foundation.

Over the years, the nonprofit has won awards, including honors from the National Endowment for the Arts, the 2015 Leadership Circle Award from the PIMCO Foundation and a 2012 Afterschool Innovator Award from the Afterschool Alliance and the MetLife Foundation.

"It's a remarkable organization, and we're really proud to have them at the Barclay," said Jerry Mandel, president of the Irvine Barclay Theatre. "The kids make a commitment, and they're well-trained. They're quite good. The Wooden Floor touches our heart."

On May 12, the Wooden Floor opened a long-anticipated second location at Depot at Santiago, a mixed-use development in Santa Ana for working families with incomes that range from 30% to 60% of the area's median income.

The 4,000-square-foot facility, which includes a dance studio, an education and community center and a family resource center, allows the Wooden Floor to serve about 100 more students and their families. Previously, the nonprofit was only able to serve 375 children annually, and was forced to turn away about 80% of children who lined up to enroll each of the past five years, Reese said.

The Wooden Floor already is looking to expand to a third location over the next several years, Reese said. The organization is also licensing out its programming and curriculum to another nonprofit, City Dance Dream in Washington, D.C.

For "Unifying Catalysts," the Wooden Floor is collaborating with three accomplished choreographers and professional dancers.

Seán Curran, chair of the dance department at the NYU Tisch School of the Arts, has worked with the students to expand a performance called "Reaction Yield."

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.