

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

Column: And now for some good news: Everybody Dance LA! continues to thrive



Teaching artist Natasha Kaneda, right, instructs her class at Everybody Dance LA! (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

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“You can’t be scared when you’re dancing.”

We could all use some good news these days, and that’s what Natasha Kaneda offered when she said this to her Jazz I class of 8- and 9-year-olds on a recent afternoon in a studio off Burlington and Wilshire.

She was reminding them to stay focused even if something went wrong during a routine — to resume their dance without fear. She said it quickly, almost as an afterthought, but it should be on a T-shirt, like the Everybody Dance LA! T-shirts these kids were wearing.

Practicing for their upcoming spring recital, these boys and girls could be part of any dance program. Well, maybe not *any* — their execution of steps exhibit grace, precision and energy, and their teachers, though unfailingly patient, are not about to let an imperfectly pointed toe or lethargic arm movement pass uncorrected.

Whatever the skill level, the courses at Burlington studios, part of the building that also holds Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, are so instantly familiar they could be anywhere.

Except that, all things being equal, or more accurately unequal, they shouldn't be here at all.



Ballet dancers wait outside a studio at Burlington and Wilshire.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)



A ballet student stretches before a rehearsal.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

For families living in certain income brackets, dance class is a rite of passage. Love it or loathe it, at some point most children will get wriggled into ballet tights or tap shoes and sent into a room with the music and the mirror to work off some energy, make friends and learn to take direction. Some might find a talent for dancing, but even if they don't, their parents will have a few minutes to breathe and tear up over the sight of their child in a tutu.

But for kids living below a certain income bracket, dance class is too often an impossibility. Clothing and lessons cost money; access to those mirrored rooms, even the ones at the local Y, is often out of reach.

The dancers and the parents at the Burlington studios fall into the latter category. Which is why, all things being unequal, these kids should not be preparing for a spring recital, their heads filled with the thunderous applause they received during March's fundraising gala at SoFi Stadium. They wouldn't ordinarily be taking pride in last summer's performance with the Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles Dance Project, or preparing to send all of their graduating seniors off to college.

Yet here they all are, part of the Everybody Dance LA!, an almost-too-good-to-be-true program [founded more than 20 years ago](#) by a grieving mother who believed that things should not remain unequal — and that you can't be scared when you're dancing.

In 1999, 13-year old Gabriella Axelrad was hit by a car while biking in the Grand Tetons National Park. After Gabriella died, her mother, Liza Bercovici, found herself unable to simply return to her life as a family law specialist. Instead, she decided to [commemorate her daughter](#), who loved to dance, by creating a program for low-income children. She would employ top dance teachers at professional wages and emphasize excellence and life skills along with creativity and collaboration.

Bercovici's biggest fear when she opened the doors to those first classes a year later, in the ballroom of the renovated [Sheraton Town House hotel near Lafayette Park](#), was that no one would come.

"I looked out the window and saw this huge crowd," she says now. "I thought it was people wanting to rent apartments in the [low-cost] building. But it was people who had come for the dance classes."

What started as 35 children in 12 extra-curricular classes grew to more than 5,000 served by in-school, after-school and summer camp classes; in 2014, Everybody Dance won a [2014 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award](#).



Tina Banchemo, right, artistic director for Everybody Dance LA!, instructs students in a hip-hop class.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)



Hip-hop student Matthew Lee, 12, center, rehearses.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Many students enter the program when they are 4 or 5 and stay until they graduate high school; a few, like Zuleny Ordonez and Kimberly Gomez, returned to work for EDLA!

“When you’re a low-income family, there’s a stigma about asking for help,” says Gomez, now a teaching artist with the program, who joined the staff as a dance site coordinator after graduating from UC Irvine. “The teachers here gave us someone to talk to, someone to listen to us. I would be here from right after school until 9. Change in the car, do homework here, it was my second home.”

Ordonez works here as teacher’s assistant while taking classes at Santa Monica College. “I was very hyper as a child and my mom found this,” she says. “I grew up with the other students here.”

In a world filled with bad news, EDLA! is one of those fairy-tale stories in which heart and hard work actually pay off. In more ways than one.

As she took her dance program to various charter schools, Bercovici realized she could do even more good if she “had the kids for eight hours instead of two.” So she founded the Gabriella Charter Schools; in 2015, she stepped down as Everybody Dance’s director, turning it over to Tina Banchemo, a former dancer and artistic director of Dance Mission Theater’s Youth Program in San Francisco. Banchemo has run it ever since.

When asked why Everybody Dance has flourished to such an amazing extent, Bercovici says simply: “There was a need.”

And there still is, now more than ever.

Like every other educational arts program, EDLA! was hit hard by the pandemic. As funding dried up, the program was forced to close two of its after-school programs, one in Echo Park, the other in South L.A. Four of its participating schools dropped dance classes to focus on academics. And though Banchemo did not have to lay anyone off, she was unable to replace five staff members who relocated.

EDLA! lost about 1,100 students during the peak of the pandemic. For those who stayed, dance class, like everything else, went virtual. “We pivoted to online in less than two weeks,” Banchemo says. “I was so proud of everyone.”



An instructor adjusts a dancer's head placement.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)



Dancers rehearse for an upcoming show.
(Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Children across the country were trapped at home for more than a year, struggling with online learning and isolation. But Banchero's students, Banchero's families, have [had a harder time than most](#). For low-income, urban families, [COVID-19 has been particularly devastating](#). Many parents lost their jobs and many of those who didn't continued to work in person. Cramped housing, which often included multiple generations, left little space for kids to study, much less dance.

"We had kids dancing between two bunk beds," Banchero said. "But it was so important for them to turn their cameras on, see our teachers and other students, and dance. We had a number of kids who were struggling with depression. So many of our families lost a loved one.

"The trauma they were going through," she says, "was real."

And not just for the kids. “I realized how much I love my job during that time,” Kaneda says. “Because when I ended my Zoom class, I would feel happy for the first time that day.”

Kaneda, like many of the instructors, is a dancer (the program accommodates staff when they get professional gigs). Which meant she too was grounded for more than a year.

“We have always emphasized life skills, skills to help our students become more successful people,” Banchero says. “But the pandemic made mindfulness part of every class. Taking stock in how you’re feeling, giving kids skills to regulate anxiety — it’s been a big programming shift for us.”

This year’s fundraising gala, held in person for the first time in two years, took place at SoFi on March 27, the same night as the Oscars. Banchero was thrilled by the venue, the performances and the attendance, but she admits the funds raised fell a bit short of what she had hoped.

“It’s hard,” she says. “We are a midsized program, and with so many smaller programs on the verge of extinction, a lot of funding has been redirected to them. It’s going to take us a few years to get back on track.”

But where there’s life, there’s hope, and there is a lot of life in the Burlington dance studios. Although they still have only two after-school sites open — at Burlington and the original Townhouse space —EDLA! now partners with 26 schools and more than 5,000 students, serving more L.A. families than ever before.

The theme of the spring recital is “Mulan”; as Banchero reminds the students of Jazz 1 and Hip Hop II, their role is “to be warriors. You are all warriors.”

Mary McNamara is a culture columnist and critic for the Los Angeles Times. Previously she was assistant managing editor for arts and entertainment following a 12-year stint as television critic and senior culture editor. A Pulitzer Prize winner in 2015 and finalist for criticism in 2013 and 2014, she has won various awards for criticism and feature writing. She is the author of the Hollywood mysteries “Oscar Season” and “The Starlet.” She lives in La Crescenta with her husband, three children and two dogs.