

Education First!

By Cameron Basden

When Bebe Schweppe opened a one-room ballet school 30 years ago, she planted the seeds for what would become a multi-faceted dance organization operating in two states. Rooted in education, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet now impacts the lives of over 500 children and offers a whopping 94 classes per week! This includes an extensive network of satellite locations in Colorado and New Mexico, each one providing a wide spectrum of dance forms such as classical ballet, jazz, tap, modern, flamenco and folkloric dance. On an even grander scale, the organization connects with Roaring Fork public schools in Basalt, Carbondale and Glenwood Springs and at El Camino Real Academy, Ramirez Thomas Elementary, Ortiz Middle School and Pinon Elementary in Santa Fe. Education and outreach are not just components of ASFB, they are truly at the heart of what the organization is about - and have been for 30 years.

Despite ever-changing protocols and logistical hardships, ASFB's educational programs forged ahead. With parents working from home and students' lives disrupted in a most challenging and uncertain fashion, ASFB was there to connect the dots. Online classes provided encouragement and inspiration to homebound children, who were spending an exorbitant amount of time on computer screens. Through Zoom, in a time of isolation, the students enjoyed a sense of community by connecting with friends who were living through the same isolation. The chance to move, to dance—a proven aspect of staying mentally stimulated and physically healthy, brought a much-needed sense of normalcy.

"It has been amazing for our daughters, Lidah and Milena, to be able to continue classes at Aspen Santa Fe Ballet throughout the pandemic. The teachers, students and families there work hard to keep each other healthy and safe, while staying focused on high quality dance education, both online and in-person. Our kids have been at the school for more than five years, and it was reassuring for all of us that there was a safe, reliable and consistent place for them to be during a time of unpredictable interruptions and cancellations. We are very appreciative of everyone's hard work and attention to all the necessary details of staying open in a trying time. Thank you for always keeping the kids in mind."

-Amy and Reed Larsen, Santa Fe



PHOTO: KLAUS KOCHER



Dance is ~~not~~ a typical activity. Dance is an art, a skill. It's about the experience, the thrill of performing. When I'm on stage, and the heat of the golden lights hits my face, I feel the most serene feeling of comfort imaginable. I want to thank you for allowing me to reach this comfort, especially in this time of discomfort,

Many Thanks,
Seagan M.

To culminate the 'at home' experience, ASFB provided a virtual recital, giving kids a chance to perform onstage at the Wheeler Opera House in Aspen, and at The Lensic in Santa Fe. Dressed in full costume and make-up, the students experienced the magic of the stage. They danced their hearts out! Even though the theater was empty, the enthusiasm and excitement of being on a stage again was infectious and each face was filled with happiness! The performances were filmed and this golden memory, a time of joy, was given to the parents to cherish.

"Aspen Santa Fe Ballet has been a consistently excellent program for our daughter since she began in Creative Dance nearly a decade ago. The instructors are superb: skilled, committed, enthusiastic, and caring. The yearly performances at The Lensic are a joy to watch, and allow a child to gain confidence from an early age. Overall, there's just a lot to love about Aspen Santa Fe Ballet."

-Judd Kleinman

Through challenging times, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet School has stayed on track. Credit is due to the School's stellar faculty and the dedication of its leadership team: Gisela Genschow and Karen Brettschneider in Santa Fe and Melanie Doscocil and Eric Chase in Aspen. Their commitment to excellence has never wavered. Throughout the pandemic, they have persevered, learning new ways of teaching—bringing out the best in their students.

"The dedication of ASFB School provided our daughter a respite from the instability around us and made it possible for her to continue her journey as a blossoming dancer. Most importantly, her dance education infuses how she lives: she dances her way through life, and, thanks to ASFB, does so with the grace, beauty, and the discipline of a ballerina."

-Jacqueline Davis and John Anderson, Santa Fe

Community-based educational and outreach programs are front and center. Since 1998, Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklorico has drawn upon the teaching of traditional Mexican folk dances to reveal a vibrant history and instill cultural pride in its participants. The preservation and passing on of these dances, provides a meaningful contribution to our communities. Classes are offered free of charge to grades K-12 at area public schools.

The dances themselves are vast and varied, more than most people realize: in Mexico's 32 states, there are a multitude of regional dances, specific in style and dress, and each with its own rich history. Program director, Francisco Nevarez-Burgueño, a.k.a. Paco, has been dancing and studying these dances for most of his life, beginning at age five as a dancer and continuing, even now, as he attends symposiums and workshops around the world. He brings a treasure trove of knowledge to the program.

Even during the pandemic, ASFB Folklorico continued, when public schools were closed. While all communities were affected by the crisis, the Latino community was disproportionately affected. Folklorico was the saving grace for countless families. Thankfully, outdoor performance opportunities were in abundance and Folklorico took full advantage. There were performances in The Fourth of July Parade, Aspen Ideas Festival, Carbondale's Annual Day of the Dead celebration, the opening of the Aspen Music Tent, and Spanish Heritage Month - and Folklorico was able to participate and to shine.

As with any non-profit arts organization, donations are vital and it takes many angels to fund the numerous educational offerings. So many families are affected by the challenges surrounding Covid-19, and there is an increased demand for financial aid. ASFB does not turn any child away who wishes to dance but cannot afford to do so. ASFB graciously acknowledges and thanks the Aspen Community

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PHOTO: MICHAEL ALVAREZ

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Foundation, Melville Hankins Family Foundation, Alpine Bank, Les Dames d'Aspen and many caring individuals who make it possible for ASFB to award \$30k yearly in tuition assistance and to keep its Folklorico outreach activities free of charge.

"We proudly support Aspen Santa Fe Ballet Folklorico because we feel it is vastly important to keep the customs of our community alive. ASFB Folklorico makes a positive and lasting impact on families of the Roaring Fork Valley."

-Lucy Moncada Arcila, Alpine Bank, Aspen

No value can be put on the life skills that students acquire through the study of dance. Discipline, self-confidence, teamwork, collaboration, attention to detail, importance of process, creativity, self-expression and artistry. Dance feeds all our souls, but children will carry these experiences in their hearts throughout their lives. Today's joyful students will become tomorrow's leaders and creative thinkers.

Cameron Basden is the artistic director of Miami Dance Hub and writes for miamiartzine and ArtBurst Miami.

We wish to thank the following sponsors for their generous support of our educational programs:



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