

Piedmont Dance Conservatory

Kannapolis Magazine



Offers Unique Opportunities in Kannapolis

In an upstairs studio in downtown Kannapolis, the land of dreams and fairytales touches the earth in patter and shuffle of slippared feet.

Here on the padded floors of the Piedmont Dance Conservatory, little girls become sugar plum ballerina and boys dashing danseurs. Here, the cares and pressures of youth subside as young minds push the world out and focus themselves on creating beauty through form and discipline.

Here, young people who dream of being dancers on metropolitan stages launch gracefully into the air and into their destinies. And here, a couple who have lived those same dreams now share that special world with those they teach and their community.

And much like great dance performances, the stories of the Piedmont Dance Conservatory and its founder, Rebecca Massey Wiley, have their own fairytale charm.



Living Where Fact Meets Fiction

Like so many young girls, Rebecca dreamed of being a ballerina. Her pursuit of that dream began not in distant lands but in her hometown of Winston-Salem, where her parents enrolled her in the nationally recognized North Carolina School of the Arts. After graduating she earned a position with the famed American Ballet Theatre in New York, an opportunity that would take her to the great metropolitan stages of the world.

But with her dream life came great challenges-hectic performance schedules, the weariness of travel and maintaining stamina. Finally, she neared retirement at 25-the typical age when most ballet careers are complete-these stresses had taken their toll.

Ready to live a "normal" life, Massey opened a boutique in Cornelius. When the economy took a turn for the worse after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Massey began teaching ballet to cover the rent. She opened a small storefront dance studio in Cornelius and began teaching 20 young students to plie' and pirouette.

In 2003, believing them ready for an extended performance, she approached the Cabarrus Arts Council to request funding to stage *The Nutcracker*. Having received a small budget, Rebecca produced and choreographed the ballet in three months, teaching Monday through Friday at the studio and squeezing in preparations and rehearsals on the weekends.

The hard work paid off as the troupe performed for 1,300 people, an impressive turnout. However, profits were anything but windfall, a grand \$200 after expenses.

This first performance was a small but significant success, for from it the Piedmont Dance Theatre-the non-profit side of the Conservatory-was born. David H. Murdock, who Rebecca says loves ballet, saw the performance and was impressed. She recalls him saying that if she were going to teach something as beautiful as ballet, she needed to do it in a beautiful space. With the lease on her studio nearing its end, she accepted the invitation from him to move her classes to Kannapolis Cannon Village, less than a block from the NC Research Campus.



Teaching an Art and Touching Lives

Today, Rebecca and her husband Daniel, a Julliard-trained, award-winning modern dancer in his own right, continue sharing their ability and their lives with students and the Kannapolis community at large. They juggle classes at the Conservatory, productions by the Theatre and family life with their nine-month-old daughter, Mila.

Of her school, Rebecca speaks proudly of its reputation for producing quality dancers. She has worked diligently for five years recruiting professional dancers in the top of their field from Julliard, major metropolitan theatres and even *The Phantom of the Opera* to fill the ranks of guest teachers.

For these reasons, she notes, students usually come to the Conservatory to become a professional dancer or to use dance to get into a good college. And apparently, her school is helping them reach their dreams. Graduates this year were accepted to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, The Boston Conservatory, and the Fordham/Alvin Ailey Program.

But Rebecca is quick to give credit to her students' commitment to their craft, indicating the rarity among young dance schools of having students who spend up to 15 hours a week in the studio.

"We're not for everybody. If you come here and don't want to work hard, you won't be happy here," she says. She notes that students who are hard workers and want to excel tend to gravitate to the Conservatory, but she is much less concerned that a young person be a great dancer or the "right body type" than that they work hard.

She stresses promoting individual excellence among the young dancers while also fostering a non-competitive environment.

“Traditionally in a dance conservatory, competition is fierce and friendships are rare,” she points out, adding that she and the other teachers diligently encourage the students to celebrate each other’s successes. She tells her students, “If someone is better than you at something, work to be happy for them.”

She is also well aware of the body image pressures her young female students face from the dance world and combats it, refusing to allow teachers, many of whom have faced these pressures themselves, to comment on a student’s physical condition. Instead, students are encouraged to remain in shape in positive ways, reinforcing healthy eating habits and care for themselves. She recalls chiding students for not eating, recognizing the tell-tale signs of lowered energy levels and poor attitudes and sending them out of the room for a snack.

According to Rebecca, pressure in general is part of the dance world, she notes that a fraction of one percent of people who want to be professional dancers actually make it.

“It’s easier to become a professional football player,” she adds.

Having lived through these challenges herself, she and Daniel all of the teachers at the Conservatory strive for a right balance between equipping their students to reach their dreams and making sure they have fun and balanced life while doing so.

The World of Dance at Kannapolis’ Doorstep

Just as the Conservatory is connecting young people with the world of dance, Piedmont Dance Theatre offers Kannapolis residents opportunity to experience performances that are typically exclusive to major metropolitan venues. Many of the finest dancers in the country—from Julliard, the American Ballet Theatre, Broadway productions, and more—converge in Kannapolis each June for a special summer production.

In the period of a few days, these ballerinas and danseurs work with professional choreographer and perform a world premier production in Kannapolis. During the time, students from the Conservatory are given the invaluable opportunity to work with and learn from these gifted artists.

This June, the group performed George Balanchine’s popular ballet *Who Cares?* at Village Park as well as a world premier production by well-respected choreographer Thang Dao.

The second major production of the year for the Theatre is *The Nutcracker* in December. Last year, this show opened in conjunction with the Salisbury Symphony Orchestra with unparalleled results. For the firsttime in 41 years,

the Salisbury Symphony sold out. And for the first time ever, during a separate performance, Catawba College's Keppel Auditorium sold out-not once but twice in the same day.

This year's *Nutcracker* will be performed apart from the Salisbury Symphony Orchestra on December 12 and 13. The two groups will join again for another spectacular performance on December 21.

For specific times and ticket information, or for more information about Piedmont Dance Theatre, please visit www.piedmontdancetheatre.com. For information about classes at the Conservatory, please visit www.piedmontdanceconservatory.com or call 704-932-TUTU (8888).