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Dance Program ‘Definitely Filling A Vacuum’

Catherine Oppenheimer founded the National Dance Institute of New Mexico in Santa Fe in 1995. NDI currently reaches 5,600 children around the state each year through various dance programs. Most recently, Santa Fe NDI students shined in a performance of the beloved tale “Peter and the Wolf,” which was narrated by actress Shirley MacLaine. Oppenheimer talked to the Journal about the pain of ballet, the lack of fitness in many of New Mexico’s kids and the future of NDI.

Journal: You are the founder of the National Dance Institute, the largest statewide arts organization in the New Mexico, and are in search of a new executive director. What special talents must an executive director for NDI have?

Oppenheimer: We are looking for a seasoned person who has been an executive director before. Particular-areas are fundraising, leadership, fiscal management- NDI has huge fundraising burden every year because we have so little earned income. Fundraising and the whole development department is a big part of our activities; we almost run two separate businesses.

Journal: Does NDI receive state or federal funding?

Oppenheimer: We got funding through the (state) Department of Health for our HIP to be Fit program (Health Initiative Plan). We got \$400,000, which is awesome. I remember the first legislative session I went to, and I saw the head of every nonprofit there, and I thought, “Where have I been?” I had no idea that nonprofits approached the state for funding, even though there is a nondonation clause in this state.

Journal: You came here from Manhattan. What else surprised you about New Mexico?

Oppenheimer: I think New Mexico is unique and having the energy, maybe the pushiness of a New Yorker, we’ve been able to get a long way in a short amount of time. I think that’s due to the desperate need for arts and physical education programs in our schools and also the size of the population here- it allows you to have a certain freedom and an ability to have an impact.

Journal: Your HIP to be Fit program develops fitness and nutrition programs for elementary students and teachers. The impacts of the program on the kids will be measured, too. It sounds like NDI is taking over the role of P.E. and health teachers of old. Are you filling a vacuum?

Oppenheimer: We are definitely filling a vacuum. The testing we are doing now and the results of the testing indicate this is the first group of students that aren’t going to outlive their parents. Their obesity levels and lack of muscle tone, cardiovascular ability and their lack of nutrition indicate that they are going to have diabetes by their late 20’s... We’re going to have a significant impact on our health care costs because this group of children growing up is so completely sedentary and out of shape and malnourished. There is a growing awareness that we have to do something.

Journal: Do you think dance should be a required school subject?

Oppenheimer: I think that the arts have to be an integrated part of overall curriculum. I think the arts teach so many things that create multifaceted, problem solving creative thinkers. This teaching to the test is clearly not working. In my mind, it creates a very narrow paradigm. The arts have been pretty well alienated from almost every school in all states, and that is a disaster. And P.E., somehow I managed to have art and P.E. everyday, and still learned how to read and write, and why we feel that is no longer possible, I don't know.

Journal: Can dance help improve math scores?

Oppenheimer: We are doing an enormous evaluation of our programs- not just the physical aspects of it, but the academic and social and emotional health aspects of our programs. We are going to have that information, about grades, connectedness to their family; we are studying all of those things. We get our first results in October 2006.

Journal: Do you have any ex-students dancing professionally now?

Oppenheimer: Not yet, but we have our first group coming up. Originally, this was purely an outreach program in the public schools, more about character building than creating professional dancers. But, over time, with the enthusiasm of those kids in the schools, we started after-school programming. We now have a group of students who are mostly 15 and 16 who are here five to six days a week, studying 20 hours a week. They are taking between three and four ballet classes, a tap class, a jazz class, theater and voice. And those kids are very talented. A number of them really want it, and they will work professionally.

Journal: You grew up in Manhattan and danced for the New York City Ballet after going to school there for eight years. What are the worst and the best thing about being a professional dancer?

Oppenheimer: The best thing is being a dancer and performing. And the music and having a body that is so finally tuned... and the magic moments that happen in performance that takes you from normal life. And the worst part is the slavery to the body and the schedule and the need in classical ballet to be so skinny.

Journal: What is your greatest ambition for NDI?

Oppenheimer: I would like to build an endowment large enough to really relieve a good part of the annual fundraising burden. We have a program to seed other NDI sites in other communities, and I think that can be developed into a whole other income stream for us. I would like to see our public school training programs grow. And then my greatest ambition is to keep the level of excellence in all areas.