

Gail Fanning Grove - On Shaping Young Dancers and the Importance of Community Arts

By Pamela Rice, Munroe Center for the Arts (MCA)

It was such a pleasure to sit down with veteran, esteemed Lexington School of Ballet (LSB) faculty member Gail Fanning-Grove to discuss her passion for dance, choreography, teaching young students, and the vibrant MCA arts scene in general.

When did you start dancing and teaching?

I first started dancing as a very young child. My parents were big jitterbug dancers, and we were always dancing at home. At five years old I started formal lessons in different styles at our neighborhood dance school. The founder of that school, Jean Coolidge, my very first teacher, is now in her 90's. By ten years old I was assisting her in classes and by twelve years old I was teaching my own preschool class for her. Dance, choreography and teaching have always been my natural inclination and trajectory. I enjoy all of it immensely. Also, my teacher believed in me, and her support was crucial in my development.

What are some of your best early memories from your dance and teaching career?

When I was around ten or eleven, I had a solo. It was a modern dance piece at a recital at our neighborhood dance school. It was very exhilarating and was a pivotal moment for me. When I was twelve, I organized a neighborhood fundraiser where I taught the whole neighborhood to dance and I choreographed the entire thing. The assassination of President Kennedy had a big impact on all of us at that time, and we raised a small donation for the Kennedy Library in South Boston. So much that was good for me stemmed from that neighborhood dance school and those early community experiences.

What's your favorite thing about teaching? What do you love most about your job?

I find dance to be very joyful, and I love sharing that joy with my students. I love seeing my students happy, confident and successful. Bringing shy students out of themselves is very personally satisfying for me. I believe in my students and their capabilities, and I love helping them find their voice through dance.

What is your formal educational background?

I hold a BFA in Dance from the Boston Conservatory, with a concentration in choreography, pedagogy and Laban Movement Analysis. I have choreographed and performed my own work at many well established venues throughout New England, and have won awards for my choreography. I have taught youth in public and private schools and arts camps for many years, and joined the faculty of LSB in 1998. Please feel free to find more details in my bio on the LSB website.

You've had a long and successful career as a dance instructor. Where do you find your daily inspiration and motivation?

My inspiration comes from the students themselves. They show up and work hard to accomplish what I am asking them to do. Also, in my creative life, which feeds into my teaching and choreography, I'm inspired by music, art, poetry and the visual arts.

How did you find LSB?

I was looking for a good school for my daughter when she was five, and I knew some of the faculty and dancers at LSB. I felt that LSB was the right place for my daughter to be dancing. She danced at LSB from kindergarten through 12th grade. The LSB experience was formative and wonderful for her, and she is now a dancer in New York City.

What do you love most about LSB?

I love the students and their families. We have wonderful families that come through our school. I also truly admire the faculty. We are all similarly trained and share similar philosophies about dance and teaching. At LSB, we teach the whole child. We consider the whole child and give every student the opportunity to experience the art form of dance. It is a very inclusive, supportive and nurturing environment. I respect the vision of our Director, Mary Petersen, and I feel honored to be a part of her school and this faculty.

What can students expect from one of your classes?

My students can expect a strong dance foundation with space to explore creativity in a safe and nurturing environment. I empower and allow my students to feel brave enough to explore their creativity and I honor and recognize them for that. I hope that

my students will be future creative artists and will always carry the joy of dance with them.

What are you most proud of in your career?

I am proud of myself for having pursued advanced training in the art of dance by putting myself through Boston Conservatory as an adult, and having the experience of training with the company members there. My choreography was chosen to represent the Boston Conservatory at the Bates Dance Festival. By pushing myself and putting myself through school, I achieved my dream of experiencing a very high level of training, which was so invigorating and inspiring.

In my teaching career, I am most proud of our high school assistants, who show such knowledge and competence in teaching. They grew up under our mentorship and now we, as a school, can launch them. This brings it all full circle for me. I grew up under the tutelage of my neighborhood teacher, and I am so proud of being able to pass that lineage and legacy down to our high school assistants. When I look at our high school assistants, I beam with pride.

What advice would you give young dancers who want to dance professionally or follow in your foot steps?

In this day and age, I would encourage students to study different styles of dance, with an emphasis on a strong ballet technique. You need to be well versed in different styles to break into the world of dance. Also, there are many other ways to be involved in dance. There is choreography and teaching. There is arts administration, like running a dance school or arts center. I would say to always collaborate with other artists and various mediums, like film, photography, musicians and other art forms. Bring the whole picture into your art form, and above all else, always dance for enjoyment. Have fun dancing, be free!

What role do you feel Munroe Center for the Arts plays in the community and in young people's lives?

Munroe Center for the Arts is an absolute hub of creativity for the community. I think of it as a mini conservatory. I come into the building and I hear piano and strings playing. Many of my dance students go to their pottery classes after dance class. I'll hear a drumming circle downstairs or in the back field. There is art hanging in the gallery and upstairs in the studios. The ceramics teacher will run by in her clay speckled apron. There is a total cross pollination of the arts happening here. It is a

true multidimensional arts scene and a community resource for enrichment. It is also multigenerational. There is a beautiful history here, and the current Director, Cristina Burwell, has developed MCA into a gem in the community. Communication here is open, clear and honest. Families can come here and have a full experience immersed and marinating in the arts. It's not just about dance, it's about the true community arts experience that MCA provides.

For more information about Munroe Center for the Arts and Lexington School of Ballet, visit:

www.munroecenter.org

www.lexingtonschoolofballet.com