

Ballet stays limber with Performance Fridays

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Janet Pichard's eagle eye for detail served her well as a dance teacher. Although she recently retired from teaching, for more than a decade she's been handling day to day operations at the Tallahassee Ballet as the CEO.

Her work as an educator and administrator gives her a broad view of the organization as a whole. Pichard has witnessed the company grow and change over the course of many years.

"A lot of what I do is figuring out how to achieve Artistic Director Tyrone Brooks' vision," says Pichard. "I couldn't be prouder of the wonderful staff, board of directors, parents and students. My job would not be a success if it weren't

for them."

The Tallahassee Ballet made a swift adjustment to COVID-19, providing online and Zoom classes for students in March. Though the May recital was cancelled, many parents opted to donate their performance fees to support the school and company. The next two weeks will be filled with camps and a summer intensive, which enforce hand-washing, temperature checks, limited class sizes, and sanitization.

On the artistic side, Pichard says she and Brooks have cooked up "Performance Fridays." After their May performance was canceled, they put together an online, encore performance via YouTube for subscribers and ticketholders.

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Tallahassee Ballet dancers Hope Eltomi and Ben Howard. MEGAN HELMAN

Ballet

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“Performance Fridays” is an extension of this idea, and features a curated set of past performances on their YouTube channel from Friday to Sunday.

“We made a video of all of our dancers behind the scenes on how they are coping with COVID, spending their time and staying in shape,” says Pichard. “After that, we decided that we needed to continue to reach out to our patrons, and so Performance Fridays takes them through the summer.”

Pichard’s first exposure to dance was also through a screen. As a child, she delighted in watching and moving along with the June Taylor Dancers on Jackie Gleason’s television variety program. She didn’t enroll in her first formal dance class until college and took to it quickly given her natural rhythm.

She graduated from Florida State University with degrees in education before teaching at the Sharon Davis School of Dance. Pichard describes herself as a strict instructor balanced out with a sense of humor. Her methods include hands on corrections that aim to physically place dancers into proper alignment.

“I go through an explanation of how they can get to where they want to go and love to see the surprise and joy on their faces when they can do it,” says Pichard.

Pichard opened her own studio, Dancer’s Image, for six years before joining the Tallahassee Ballet as Executive Director. Prior to that she was a marketer and advertiser for her own PR company as well as for Roland Publishing. Her transition into arts administration was seamless as she applied her skills as a business owner to the Ballet.

However, teaching remains at the core of her joy and connection to ballet as an art form. Many of her proudest moments have been when students reach out and let her know how they are using her teachings in other aspects of their lives.

“Ballet revolves around discipline,” says Pichard. “I can’t tell you how much it means to me to have students who have come back and said, ‘I learned this from you.’ Most of these things are not ballet steps, but how to treat people with respect and how to expect the most from themselves.”

One former student, now a teacher at the National Institute of Dance in New York, shared with Pichard how she reassured a student who couldn’t complete a turn and fell down. Pichard was happy to hear that she had passed along the advice she would often give classes — falling only means you went for something, and that’s something to take pride in.

“In ballet, you’re measured more by what you do after you fail rather than your successes,” says Pichard. “It’s how you handle those failures. That’s what makes you a good person.”

She sees these life lessons in action at every level of the dance school and professional company. Pichard knows that ballet teaches not only teamwork, but self-confidence, and discipline. Many of the students at the Ballet are service oriented in addition to being strong movement technicians. The organization has taken students to the Food Co-op to pick vegetables and the hospital to give performances for patients.

Though in-person performances are not viable at the moment, Pichard is looking ahead to the future season. The annual Evening of Music and Dance is set to be performed at the Moon as a live-streamed event only. Classes will continue in-person and virtually. Meanwhile, “Performance Fridays” is Tallahassee Ballet’s salve for ballet lovers in the community longing to connect with their company again.

“These are good stewards of our community and they’re wonderful artists,” says Pichard. “Dance is important for our community at large because it’s a way to escape and uplift our spirits and our hearts. The performances are a moment to be able to sit back, relax and let yourself go in a beautiful piece of artistry.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).