



A student at Dance ALIVE! leaps through the air at a recent class.

by JARIS ENGLISH, Renton Reporter Columnist

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When I walked into the Lind Avenue studio and saw the kids from Renton's Evergreen City Ballet school, all leaping around in their leotards, I felt the years slip away and once again I was a girl in Dotty Dunn's Dance Studio, standing at the barre and trying to get my knees to go in the right direction for a proper plie.

I was nowhere as talented as these young people - I was much better with tap shoes than ballet slippers - but I still remember my dance classes fondly.

I was at Evergreen to meet with Kevin Kaiser, the artistic and executive director of the school. Kevin told me he started dancing when he was 4 years old. He was one of five brothers who made up a professional tap dancing group: the "Kaiser Brothers." They grew up outside of Seattle and toured extensively.

At 16, he performed with the Pennsylvania Ballet. Later he returned to Seattle and joined Pacific Northwest Ballet, and for 15 years danced roles from world-renowned choreographers. Four of the five brothers are still professionally involved in performance art.

Kevin was appointed artistic director of Evergreen City Ballet in January 2008 and has choreographed two original works.

"I am excited to bring my years of dedication and experience in the field of dance to this rapidly growing area of the Northwest." Kevin said, "Not many people get a chance to do for a living what they really love to do!"

We were joined by Andi Bryndza, who is the ballet mistress and outreach director for the nonprofit organization. Andi told me she grew up with the Evergreen City Ballet, first as a student when the organization was in Auburn. As a young dancer, she performed in Europe and Austria before returning to this area to work as the outreach director for the ballet company.

"I always enjoyed working with kids," she said.

Evergreen City Ballet created the Dance ALIVE! outreach program in the fall of 2008 to fill a gap left behind by public school budget cuts over the last few decades. The program serves elementary school children throughout South King County, at no cost to them or their schools.

Both Kevin and Andi are passionate about helping to bring the arts to children.

"Eighty percent of the children in Renton schools are on the subsidized lunch program," Andi said. "And there is no budget in the schools for the arts anymore, so they never get a chance to be exposed to those opportunities."

"Very few public schools offer arts education," Kevin added, "and it's such a shame! Kids learn so much from the arts. An example is time management. Ninety-Eight percent of our dance students are A and B students. They spend hours every day committed to perfecting their dance, and yet they also do homework."

Since its inception, Dance ALIVE! has served more than 10,000 children and is active in six school districts: Renton, Tahoma, Auburn, Kent, Tukwila, and Federal Way.

Children in the Dance ALIVE! program learn to understand the importance of healthy lifestyles, including diet, exercise and rest. They have the opportunity to express themselves through dance and see how emotions are always present within dance. Children also develop a greater appreciation of music and understand that they can dance to many types of music. The artistic staff of Dance ALIVE! identify students who show special interest and potential and offer them full scholarships to attend the school.

I told them I had asked my 9-year-old grandson what he thought about taking ballet lessons, and he made an awful face. I asked them how they convince young boys to take lessons.

"With social media, many sports teams like the Steelers have made videos of the team taking ballet lessons," Kevin said. "It looks easy on stage, as it is supposed to, but it is very athletic and these athletes talk about how grueling it is. When the boys see these videos, they get excited about trying it."

"I tell them they don't have to wear pink tutus!" Andi added.

The Evergreen City Ballet offers pre-performance ballet classes for aspiring professionals along with open classes in a variety of dance forms for all ages and abilities. They also offer a summer program.

"Many of our dancers have gone on to professional careers with renowned ballet companies around the world including San Francisco Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet and Oregon Ballet Theatre," Kevin said.

He also said he wants students to know that there are other career paths in the field besides performance, such as choreography, lighting, costumes, music and others.

Along with the traditional "Nutcracker," the group also performs a one-hour version of the beloved holiday classic, which they see as a good introduction for younger children and those who haven't experienced ballet. Renton performances are at the Ikea Performing Arts Center. In the spring, they are looking forward to presenting "Fancy Nancy and the Mermaid Ballet at the Meydenbauer Center in downtown Bellevue.

With so many programs, classes, and amazing performances, Evergreen City Ballet is a far cry from my memories of Dotty Dunn's Dance Studio in 1951. Now I just need to find those football player ballet videos for my grandson!

Summer classes have already ended (I was there for the last day of class), but fall classes begin Sept. 6. To learn more about the program or to see about registering for classes, see their website at [evergreencityballet.org](http://evergreencityballet.org).