

SUNDAY, SEPT. 4, 2022 | NORTH HEMPSTEAD-OYSTER BAY

Newsday

Llife

N11



Joy is the pointe

STUDENT TURNS TEACHER, OFFERING FREE CLASSES AND DONATED DANCE GEAR E2

Invitation to DANCE



Teen and student team up to offer free classes to young neighbors

BY ELLEN YAN
Special to Newsday

Little kids in colorful leotards will twirl and leap this month at a Port Washington dance studio, all free, from the lessons to their ballet shoes.

"I'm so excited," said Fatima Machuca Garcia, 10, of Port Washington. "I like dance. It makes me happy."

Dance for Joy, a 10-week program, kicked off last September at Berest Dance Center as the daydream became reality for a high school student from Great Neck.

Michelle Wasserman wanted to give a world hurting in pandemic a little bit of cheer through a little bit of dance. The course, held for an hour on Sundays, is aimed at third- to fifth-graders who live in Port Washington and whose families cannot afford the \$1,000 for Berest's regular 36-week program. Wasserman volunteers her time to teach them ballet, hip-hop, contemporary and other dance styles.

"I was just sitting in my

Above, Olga Berest, owner of the Port Washington dance studio, with volunteer teachers Michelle Wasserman, center, and Susanna Keiserman.

At right, Berest fits Sofia Machuca Garcia, 5, with a pair of dancing shoes.



ON THE COVER. Michelle Wasserman, right, and Susanna Keiserman, both 16, teach 10-year-old dance student Fatima Machuca Garcia, second from right, and Ashley Caruso at Berest Dance Center in Port Washington.



LIFE M

JAMES ESCHER

Dance students Ashley Castillo, 10, and Sofia Machuca Garcia, 5, chat with Michelle Wasserman and Susanna Keiserman, who will be teaching the 10-week session together.

Dance Class Free of Charge for Dancers in 3rd-5th Grade!



At Berest Dance Center

A detail from the program's flyer.

JOIN THE DANCE

Dance for Joy is accepting applications until next Sunday; to apply or to donate, contact Berest Dance Center, berestdance.com, at 516-944-6687 or berestdance@gmail.com.

room, going from class to class on Zoom, super bored," recalled Wasserman, 16, a senior at Great Neck North High School. "Not going to dance studio was so hard. Dancing in my room was so challenging. After hearing so many sad stories about parents losing their jobs ... I thought of a way to give back, and the first thing

I thought of was teaching dance class free of charge."

She asked Olga Berest, owner of the studio, where she takes about 10 hours of lessons a week, if she could use a room to teach children shut out of dancing opportunities. Berest, a child speech therapist who started her studio business 45 years ago, was thrilled. So last

September, Wasserman became the sole teacher of the budding dancers.

Now, as Dance for Joy prepares for an encore, with applications being accepted until Sept. 11, its reality has surpassed Wasserman's daydreams.

The new session starts Sept. 18, but when the program ends in November, several youngsters will be able to continue dancing at the studio's regular classes, thanks to the families of current and former Berest students and a nonprofit grant, said studio owner Olga Berest, 78, of Manhasset.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

More than \$6,000, along with dance clothing, has poured in to help pay for classes. After Berest sent just one email blast to current and past clients asking for donations, she said, she got almost \$2,000 in less than a day, with the funds growing since. The dance studio also received a \$2,000 grant from HEARTS PW (Helping Enrich the Arts

of Port Washington), which hosts the annual PortFest of music and arts. More has been promised, she said.

The speed of generosity and the outpouring have left Berest teary-eyed.

"I barely got my finger off the send button," the studio owner said one afternoon last month. "My phone started lighting up after five minutes. I did not expect this. It hasn't even been 24 hours. I have some families that are giving me \$400. Four families gave me \$200. I am beyond excited for this."

"We've seen the need for so many families."

Said Wasserman, "I was definitely surprised at the donations! We are very grateful."

The money will help pay the studio's regular teachers, after the first 10 weeks of lessons, and for clothing, shoes and other supplies for the children taking free classes.

Last year's Dance for Joy classes had 10 students. Each

Sunday, the main dance room at Berest was abuzz with a mix of English and Spanish, with dashes of French, the language of ballet, said Wasserman. Boys can sign up for the program, though only girls applied last year.

Marlen Aceituno, 45, who lives a few blocks from the studio, said her daughter Ashley Castillo, 10, would often plead for dance class whenever they passed the studio.

But Aceituno, who works cleaning houses, didn't have the money and could only give her child a parent's eternal promise: one day.

"She said, 'You promise, Mama?' " Aceituno recounted. "I told my husband, 'I can't buy anything for you. I'm saving for Ashley.'"

Then she learned of Wasserman's program, which the teenager publicized through flyers posted on social media and spread by community groups. Aceituno, who emi-

See COVER STORY on E4

Ballet, tap, hip-hop, 1, 2, 3

COVER STORY from E2

grated from Honduras, said she has cried tears of gratitude for the class and opportunities in this country, never thinking that her daughter would one day learn dance for free.

"She dances in my house all the time," the mother said. "It's beautiful. She loves music, like me."

DISCOVERING THEIR GIFTS

Beyond the free lessons, Dance for Joy students won't have to pay for clothing. Especially for growing children, clothing costs can add up to hundreds of dollars that their parents cannot afford — tights, leotards, hip-hop outfits and more.

Ashley outgrew the light-blue leotard she wore when she started at Dance for Joy, then outgrew a maroon leotard and has now gotten a royal blue one, which she says will help her dance better because it fits. The clothing, and \$35 tap shoes for this year, have been donated or paid for by donations.

A fifth-grader, Ashley said she wants to be a ballet teacher when she grows up and juggle that job with being a doctor: "When I get a day off my ballet teaching, I can do some doctor thing. And when my boss calls me, I can tell him I got to teach ballet and I can come tomorrow."

Her friend Fatima said she enjoys Dance for Joy because it helps her get strong and keep her heart healthy. "I practice at home so I can be better at it," she said.

During Fatima's fitting for clothes at the dance studio last year, her sister Sofia, 5, looked so sad at being left out that Olga Berest decided to give her a scholarship, enrolling her in regular dance classes for kindergartners. Berest also had accepted Fatima in the regular classes after Dance for Joy ended last year.

Fatima and Ashley will return to Wasserman's free classes this year, and they, along with Sofia, will have lessons for free for the year as part of the studio's regular curriculum, Berest said.

"The children get to discover their abilities and gifts," said their father, Jose Machuca,



The program is for older kids, but Olga Berest also gave a scholarship to 5-year-old Sofia Machuca Garcia, whose sister Fatima is a student.

“The children get to discover their abilities and gifts.”

— Jose Machuca, father of two students

42, a church secretary. "They get the opportunity to really cherish and remember something from what they learned in dancing for the rest of their lives."

Sofia and Ashley performed in the June stage show that capped the dance school year, a sight that their parents never expected.

"I held back my tears," said, Arcely Garcia, Sofia's mother.

"It was such a joy to see them up on the stage."

Like last year, Wasserman has been a driving force behind Dance for Joy. A lifelong dance student, the teenager handles outreach to potential students, designing a flyer and posting it on social media. With the help of a school guidance counselor, community groups and Olga Berest, she identifies and selects stu-

dents who otherwise couldn't take dance lessons.

This year, she has recruited dance friend Susanna Keiserman, 16, of Port Washington, to share teaching duties because both are high school seniors and much of their free time will be consumed by researching and applying to colleges.

About 12 students will be in the class, up from 10 a year ago.

A SPECIAL BOND

Dance for Joy is far from Wasserman's first act of kindness. Every month, she and other young people at her synagogue, Babylonian Jew Center in Great Neck, work on community service projects, from baskets of goodies for senior citizens during the pandemic to winter coat collections for those facing financial difficulties.



Students Ashley Castillo, right, and Fatima Machuca Garcia get some pointers from Susanna Keiserman, who this year is teaching along with Michelle Wasserman, left.



Donated dance leotards and shoes are collected for the fast-growing students at Berest Dance Center.



Dancers warm up during last year's session, in a photo taken by Michelle Wasserman.

For the dance project, Wasserman said she had to research how to teach dance to youngsters and prepare lesson plans, with Berest's help. Berest, who sometimes watched classes through the center's cameras, said it was clear the students adored their young teacher.

In keeping with the dance center's philosophy, Wasserman said the key is never

telling a child he or she did something wrong. "It was important never to put them down," she said. "I would say 'try it this way' or 'how about this instead?'"

In the first few classes last year, the students were shy, the teenager recalled. Some chatted with each other privately in Spanish. But soon, she said, a "special bond" developed, with the children

trusting her.

She also found herself learning from the students. Wasserman, who likes to have everything organized, said she often had to ditch daily lesson plans and go with her students' flow. For the first 15 minutes or so of each class, the girls might listen and follow her instructions — until their buoyant personalities and age-appropriate atten-

tion spans took over.

To get them to practice technical moves, Wasserman might promise to allot time at the end of the class for leaping across the mirrored room — her students' favorite dance move. Or she might invite them to get creative, asking each to come up with an improv move that would be stitched into a class dance, she said. Bribes of candy at the end

of the class also helped, she said.

Or she would let them pick out a large stuffed animal — a llama or dog, for instance, from Berest's collection — to hold as a silent partner or to put on the floor to leap over. (Decades ago, Olga Berest added stuffed animals to her teaching arsenal to help kindergarten students

See COVER STORY on E6



JAMES SCHER

Co-teachers Michelle Wasserman of Great Neck North High School, left, and Susanna Keiserman of Schreiber High School rehearse a performance at the studio.

More dancing, more joy

COVER STORY from E5

feel more comfortable.)

"It was definitely more mentally challenging than physically challenging teaching the class," the teenager said.

Keiserman, who substituted in one class last year, was surprised at how high some of the girls could leap. She said dance teaches children life skills — discipline, how to listen and take constructive criticism — and was happy that ballet, often seen as "exclusive," was opened to more children. "I couldn't believe there hadn't been a program like that happening every year," Keiserman said.

KEEPING IT FUN

By teaching the youngsters, Wasserman said, she learned to let go of a little of her perfectionist, structured side and let the children's fun take over. Being creative and not having to watch her technique all the time are reasons she loves dancing and does not want to be a professional dancer, with all the stress involved.

"At the end of the day, my class is called Dance for Joy, not Dance to be Perfect," she said.

For those involved, Dance for Joy has meshed segments of the population that don't often meet over dance lessons.

Berest said Wasserman's program jump-started her pre-COVID-19 efforts to expand outreach to families with less income. Over the years, she said, her studio and teachers have partnered with after-school and community programs, and one question she's always asked is what she will do if there

are too many children whose families cannot pay. She said she finds a way to include them.

"I have a feeling this is going to snowball and not just in the Port Washington community," Berest said of Dance for Joy.

The amount of donations will determine how many students Dance for Joy and the Berest studio can take this year. Historically, the studio had about 400 students, Berest said, but when the pandemic required classes to be held on Zoom, the number was closer to 200. Berest said the dance center is still trying to bounce back from the impact of COVID-19.

Wasserman and Berest said they're not worried Dance for Joy will peter out when the teenager goes off to college. The two have been thinking about other high school-age dancers at the studio they might ask to step into the role.

Machuca, Fatima's father, has wanted to give his children more than what he had growing up, more than just food on the table. As Fatima does cartwheels at home and grooves to Disney movies, he credits Dance for Joy with enriching the family's life and giving his daughter a new circle of friends.

"As they say, you always want to do better than your parents did," Machuca said. "The seeds you plant today are the fruit of tomorrow."

Wasserman said she has been moved to tears by stories of hardship and thanks from her students' parents.

"It was definitely a passion project that took a lot of time and effort," she said, "but I'm definitely proud of this. I definitely colored every minute of it."