

Dance School Works to Get Back on Its Feet

Covenant Ballet Theatre of Brooklyn Works to Recover From Financial Blows

By

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Kevin Hagen for

Marla Hirokawa with students at the CBT Dance Academy's new home in Brooklyn's Marine Park section.

In an area of Brooklyn not known as an epicenter of the arts, Marla Hirokawa has been sowing the seeds of high culture for 25 years. Ms. Hirokawa's Covenant Ballet Theatre of Brooklyn and CBT Dance Academy had become a beloved part of the Gravesend community when the loss of an important donor and the aftereffects of superstorm Sandy sent the nonprofit ballet and modern-dance school into a financial tailspin.

Ms. Hirokawa offered classes for Orthodox Jewish women, closed to men, in which she and other non-Orthodox members covered their heads with wigs or kerchiefs. She also started a free program for boys, taught by male dancers, in an effort to counter negative stereotypes of male ballet dancers.

Then she was hit by the loss of a donor and fallout from superstorm Sandy, which devastated the families of many students and forced her to move Covenant to a temporary home in Marine Park. There she has been trying to cobble together a constituency of old and new students.

"It was the most intense and grueling two years I've ever lived through," said Ms. Hirokawa, a former teaching artist with the New York City Ballet's education department.

Since many of her neighborhood students withdrew, the bills started to mount, but a high-powered brain trust helped keep her organization afloat. Steve Rissman, a lawyer who also serves as vice president of the Dumbo theater company St. Ann's Warehouse, said he's driven by a "passion for artistic gems like Covenant." He funded three Covenant donor "cultivation events" and put up half the money for a seven-minute promotional video aimed at prospective students and their families.

Lawrence Brandman, a bankruptcy lawyer and Covenant advisory board member whose daughter Fiona came to Covenant from the School of American Ballet, connected Ms. Hirokawa with pro-bono lawyers at Weil, Gotshal & Manges. She also met a fundraising mentor through the website Catchafire.org, which connects professionals to nonprofits.

In May, the school launched a fundraising campaign on FundAnything.org, which drew the attention of its co-founder, Donald Trump, who kicked in \$2,500. Ms. Hirokawa wound up slightly exceeding her target of \$19,000 to cover moving costs, storage space for costumes and props, and temporary office space. More than half of her donations came from families and alumni of the dance academy.

Over the summer, Covenant found a home at Dance Spot, a studio owned by Mona Freeman on a residential stretch of Avenue T in Marine Park. The two women are experimenting with a longer-term space-sharing arrangement, where Ms. Hirokawa plans to continue both her classes for Orthodox Jewish women and boys, among others.

To introduce Covenant to the neighborhood, Ms. Hirokawa plans a registration fair and open house on Saturday. "I'm excited about the potential that's here," she said. "One huge goal is to take the company and organization to the next level, to focus on stability and continued expansion."

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