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Arts Center starts fall programming with help from Charlotte Ballet

Carrie C. Causey Aug 22, 2018

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Charlotte Ballet is partnering with the Cornelius Arts Center to provide movement classes for preschoolers and seniors.

Courtesy of Peter Zay – Charlotte Ballet

ORNELIUS – The future Cornelius Arts Center is still in its planning and fundraising stages, but the nonprofit's staff is ready to move forward with its first programming offering this fall.

C The Cornelius Arts Center is partnering with the Charlotte Ballet as well as the Cornelius Parks, Arts, Recreation and Culture Department to host dance classes for two groups often left out. Starting Oct. 3 and running through Dec. 12, dance and movement classes will be offered for pre-kindergarteners and seniors at the town's art center at Oak Street Mill.

“For us, the mission is to provide exceptional visual arts, performing arts and social experiences, and obviously education and youth education are drivers,” Cornelius Arts Center Executive Director Justin Dionne said of why they wanted to start the initiative. He added it could be an economic driver for people spending the afternoon in downtown, plus it offers exposure for the future arts center and strengthens regional and private partnerships.

“(The PARC) Cornelius Arts Center doesn't offer performing arts,” Dionne said. “We don't want to duplicate what comes from PARC. ... They have painting and ceramics. We wanted to do something else.”

This is the first time Charlotte Ballet has offered classes in north Mecklenburg, though the outreach has taken place in south Charlotte.

“The Cornelius Arts Center reached out to us,” said Charlotte Ballet Director of Education and Community Engagement Bianca Bonner, adding the group only wants to partner with organizations that are inviting them in. “We want to be able to offer the classes in a different area and reach out and engage with others in the community who may not be as close to our uptown location.”

Classes, taught by Gretchen Jax, must have at least 10 participants to take place, though they are capped at 25. The targeted Pre-K age is 3-5, with no age limitation on the senior class. Charlotte Ballet also didn't want to step on the toes of other area groups.

“There are dozens of dance studios that address children and adults, but the preschoolers and older adults can be overlooked,” Bonner said. “This seeks to give what they need.”

The youth class is aimed for an introduction to movement.

“Our preschool class mirrors the program we have here at the center for dance,” Bonner said, saying it’s getting them used to the music.

It teaches them rhythm and is aimed to offer a fun learning environment that is age appropriate. Skills are the precursor for pre-ballet classes. The 10 weeks will end with a showing for parents.

“Being able to see them share – we call them showings – and see what they are able to do,” Bonner said about her favorite aspect of the classes.

The participants of the senior class can decide how they want it to go.

“It can be in a chair, standing up, both,” Dionne said. “We want to encourage movement. It’s a group experience, not a structured ballet class.”

Bonner added it’s more about reintroducing movement to the body, regardless if attendees have taken dance classes before.

Once the future Cornelius Arts Center officially opens, the aim is to have space to continue these types of classes.

“We first did the market study survey and learned what people wanted, responded to and were willing to pay for using focus groups and arts organizations,” Dionne said. “People are looking for more space.”

But he didn’t want to be trying things out once that space becomes available.

“The idea is to get open and be moving,” he said. “That is not the time to be testing everything. ... We want to have good flagship programs. This is the first in an array to get going and see how it goes.”

Future plans are to bring children’s theater opportunities to the area, thanks to a grant obtained through N.C. Sen. Jeff Tarte.

“This is a great opportunity to spread arts education,” Dionne said, adding more will be announced in the future.

The planning for the overall facility slated for the heart of downtown is still in its quiet fundraising stage.

“There is nothing official I can share other than it’s going well in a positive direction,” Dionne said. “We are feeling confident in the direction we are heading.”