

REDONDO BEACH

SMArts nonprofit teaches STEM through dance

by Melissa Heckscher

When 8-year-old Kate Andi went to see “The Nutcracker Suites” in Lawndale, she was looking for more than just whirling sugarplum fairies and dancing peppermints. She was also looking for symmetry, counterbalance, force — scientific concepts illustrated perfectly through dance.

“There’s slide symmetry, rotational symmetry, bilateral symmetry,” said the Juan De Anza School second grader, who was one of more than 1,200 kids bused in Thursday, Dec. 5, to see the abridged version of the classic ballet by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. “The sugarplum fairies are still my favorite part, though.”

Andi’s school, in Hawthorne, is one of 37 across Los Angeles County — from Long Beach to San Fernando — participating in a

program called SMArts, based in Redondo Beach. An acronym for Science, Math and Arts, the nonprofit program is dedicated to teaching these concepts through elements of dance.

“Many ballet companies bus in kids to see ‘The Nutcracker’; it’s a very common thing,” said Jack Virga-Hall, who co-founded the SMArts program with Linden McPherson, owner of Redondo Beach Pacific Dance Center.

“Schools often shy away from it because it’s one extra thing that they have to squeeze into their day. So we looked at it from a different standpoint. We looked at it as, ‘How can we use dance with education?’”

The duo decided in 2017 they would start a nonprofit arm of Pacific Dance Center called Ballet Pacifica. Under it, they would



Ballet Pacifica dancers perform the Nutcracker at Centinela Valley Performing Arts in Lawndale. The event hosted 1,000 students by nonprofit SMArts program, a curriculum that introduces dance and incorporates Science, Math and Arts. (Photo by Brittany Murray)

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Family, fireworks and festivities

A family takes a photo with Santa at the 31st annual Skechers Manhattan Beach Holiday Fireworks Festival. For more photos and the story behind the boat that ran aground, see pages 8 and 9. (Photos by Gil Castro)

HERMOSA BEACH

City Councilmembers go public with grievances against colleague

by David Rosenfeld

City Councilmember Hany Fangary’s wife sued Hermosa Beach last week, arguing the city for which her husband serves committed a Brown Act violation when his council colleagues passed him up for the mayor pro tem position in November.

Fangary, a lawyer by trade, and Hermosa Beach City Attorney Michael Jenkins on Thursday, Dec. 5, confirmed the lawsuit had been filed. Fangary is both at the center of the suit and acting as his wife’s counsel.

Fangary and another attorney, Justin Ledden, appeared in Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday, Dec. 4, attempting to prevent a discussion from happening at a special City Council meeting later that night regarding the selection process for the

panel’s leadership. They sought to move the discussion to a regular council meeting later this month instead.


Fangary’s attempt for a temporary restraining order was denied, he and Jenkins said.

“I’ve been in this business for 40 years,” Jenkins said, “and I’ve never seen a sitting city council member acting in his capacity as an attorney suing the city of which he is a council member.

“It raises a lot of interesting issues,” he added.

Fangary had been in line to become Hermosa Beach’s mayor pro tem during what is typically a routine annual rotation of city leadership. The council chose among themselves to have Councilmember Mary Campbell replace Stacey Armato as mayor

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make a program that would use Common Core standards to teach kids math and science through ballet.

To do so, they turned to Corina McGovern, a Manhattan Beach research psychologist and former teacher, who volunteered her time to develop the class. Over several months, McGovern wrote a curriculum that volunteer docents could teach in four 45-minute classes.

"The lessons offer a unique interdisciplinary approach to dance and movement," said McGovern, who lives in Manhattan Beach. "The kids learn to see the beauty in symmetry, not just as a math construct but how it exists in nature and is reflected in dance."

"Using their own bodies, they get to create symmetrical movements and explore the physics of force helping to create states of balance and counterbalance."

Docents, usually parents, use McGovern's scripted combination of slides, videos and in-class exercises to get kids moving and dancing while they learn challenging concepts.

"By the end of the class, I have second graders telling me what rotational order shapes in the classroom are," Virga-Hall said. "So it's just teaching the concepts that the teachers need to get through in their year — with the aid of movement."

The idea caught on quickly. Twenty-nine schools, both public and private, quickly



Students from San Miguel Catholic School in Los Angeles, watch. L-R Kai Bernal and Lula Coffey watch. (inset)

volunteered to teach the pilot program last year. They ranged from public schools who might otherwise not have access to dance enrichment programs to South Bay schools like Robinson and Hermosa View elementary schools.

This year's roster is up to 37, with more on the wait list.

"It really is amazing," said Hermosa View second grade teacher Jennifer Cederquist. "Kids are a little bit reluctant at first, especially the boys. But when they realize the program is about art and science and math and how that all works to explain what dance is, they get really excited."

Most importantly, the kids seem to love it.

"I think it's super-fun," said Andi, who also takes ballet classes with Pacific Dance Center and was in the cast of last weekend's full-length 'Nutcracker' performance. "I like when we get to do the pantomime in class."

Juan Sanchez, a second grader at Saint

Francis X Cabrini School, in South Los Angeles, also enjoys it

"I kind of like it," Sanchez said. "Mostly, I like the science, math and art part of ballet."

And then, of course, there's the show. 'The Nutcracker Suites' used a shorter format and a streamlined cast compared to the sprawling, full-length show. The full production — at the Centinela Valley Center for the Arts, at Lawndale High School — featured a cast of 175 dancers, ranging in age from 4 to 17 years old.

The SMARts kids, in preparation to watch the hour-long show, must learn proper theater etiquette. That includes arriving 30 to 40 minutes before the show starts, applauding when appropriate and keeping quiet during the performance.

If Thursday morning's performance was any indication, that lesson has been learned. The young audience members gasped when the dancing mice drew their swords; they bobbled with anticipation upon hearing the first few notes of "Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy;" and they

clapped their hands at just the right times.

"Last year, we had a thousand second graders in the theater and you could hear a pin drop," Virga-Hall said. "It gave me goosebumps"

Of course, since the program is offered free of charge, it takes a lot of donations to keep it going. Skechers was the first corporate sponsor, while school fundraisers and parent donations are helping raise the rest of the targeted \$78,000 needed to provide the supplies, props and tools to keep the program going — not to mention the buses to bring the kids to the show.

McPherson and Virga-Hall said they hope to expand the program by adding more schools to the roster and by eventually offering free or low-cost dance instruction at underserved schools.

"It's been a dream," McPherson said.

"And then when it actually happened in reality and then it grew so fast," she added. "I'm just astonished."



Ballet Pacifica dancers perform the Nutcracker ballet. (Photos by Brittany Murray/SCNG)

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5:15 PM - 7:15 PM	7:00 PM - 10:00 PM	4:00 PM - 6:00 PM
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