

Memphis Business Journal

Ballet Ensemble moving into new Midtown digs to improve inner city reach

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by [John Scruggs](#)

Memphis' New Ballet Ensemble is poised to move into a new Midtown space, and founder Katie Smythe Thinnes hopes the new home will allow her to reach further into the community with dance instruction for inner city youth.

The New Ballet Ensemble, which Thinnes directs and runs in a former icehouse at 2166 Central, will soon be moving to a renovated warehouse at 2157 York in Midtown. The building was formerly home to the Keathley Pie factory.

New Ballet Ensemble will break ground on the new facility May 16.

The three studios in the new facility will allow Thinnes and her instructors to take on additional students, hopefully increasing the number of scholarship students in the process.

Thinnes, a self-proclaimed "die-hard Midtownner," says she had to have a building in the center of the city if she was going to reach out to inner city children with her program.

Thinnes says the building on York was donated to her non-profit school two years ago because the dance company was already outgrowing its space in the icehouse, which they rent from Stephen Schwartz.

With the help and ingenuity of Midtown real estate firm [Lewis & Raspberry](#), Thinnes eventually saw potential in the building, though at first, she didn't think it had much potential.

"They painted the outside of the building," she says. "After that, I looked at it differently."

The 6,500-square-foot warehouse will undergo a \$1.2 million renovation and Thinnes hopes to move into the space by late September.



[Grinder Haizlip](#) is the contractor on the project and Michael Walker, of [JBHM](#), is designing the facility.

Chris McDermott, project manager for Grinder Haizlip, says the project will add additional dance spaces, a second floor with offices and a pilates studio.

"When they came to us and asked us to partner with JBHM on this project, it was a no-brainer," he says. "Katie is the perfect person for what she's doing. She's trying to give inner city children a chance to experience things that they otherwise would not have to opportunity to do."

Walker says he knew the warehouse space would lend itself to a lot of opportunities.

NBE's new home on York will have locker rooms, a green room and versatile spaces that can be used as board rooms or study halls. Plans also call for radiant baseboard heat, which will help keep dancers' legs warm at all times, Walker says.

The new digs signal a change for the ballet studio, which has focused on instruction and opportunity rather than raising money.

New Ensemble Ballet, which Thinnes describes as a "break even ballet" up until now, has never raised funds. In the past Thinnes says she has offered a number of unfunded scholarships in order to teach students who had the talent but not the funds for professional dance instruction.

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"I think people always thought we had a lot of funding," she says. "But before we started raising funds, I knew it was important that we establish a strong board and a strategic plan."

Boardroom experience was something Thinnes learned during her formative years, sitting around board meetings at her family's businesses, Memorial Park Funeral Home and the family's transportation interests in [Yellow Cab](#).

After establishing a strategic plan and a board of directors, NBE began raising funds and applied for and received a three-year, \$100,000 per year renewable grant from the Assisi Foundation. The Briggs, Lichterman-Lowenberg and Hohenberg foundations have also supported NBE.

"My goal is to have 50% more students on full scholarship," Thinnes says. "I want to blend the tuition paying students in with the full scholarship students in the core program."

Having already raised close to \$1 million, Thinnes says the formal fund-raising campaign is ready to begin, and the capital will foster continued growth of New Ballet's programs, scholarships and her mission to bring ballet to inner city Memphis.

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