

Poised for Success

New ballet school latest in Cooper-Young's renaissance

ANDREW ASHBY | *The Daily News*

The New Ballet Ensemble & School is bringing dance instruction closer to the heart of the Cooper-Young neighborhood - further enhancing a growing area that, with boarded windows and empty storefronts, once looked like a ghost town.

The studio, which teaches ballet and other types of dance to tuition and scholarship students ages 4 to adult, is moving to a renovated 14,000-square-foot warehouse at 2157 York Ave.

The renovations will cost \$1.2 million. The NBE has raised almost \$1 million over the past five years and Regions Bank has extended a line of credit to allow the school to open by September. Grinder Haizlip Construction Co. Inc. is building the project and architect Michael Walker of Johnson Bailey Henderson McNeel Architects PA is designing it. An anonymous donor gave the building to NBE.

NBE currently rents space at a renovated icehouse at 2166 Central Ave. There, Katie Smythe Thinnes, artistic director and CEO, shares an office with two other teachers. The facility's practice space is open and offers no privacy for students. More important, two classes cannot practice at the same time, which limits the school's growth. One of Thinnes' classes has 20 children in it, although she likes to keep class sizes to 15 students or fewer.



TAKE YOUR POSITIONS: (Foreground to background) Madeline Bradley, Danielle Coleman, Brianna Brown, Tamiah Williams and other classmates perfect movements from Esquela Bolera, a Spanish dance technique taught by NBE teacher Noelia Garcia Carmona.

— PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW ASHBY



WORDS OF WISDOM: Artistic director Katie Smythe Thinnes works with 9-year-old Madeline Bradley during a practice session at the the New Ballet Ensemble & School's current location at 2166 Central Ave. In the background, Tamiah Williams works on her moves.

— PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW ASHBY

"I really pride myself on small class size," Thinnes said. "Children learn much better with individual attention."

Degas would be proud

The new facility will offer three dance studios, which Thinnes said could allow the school to double its number of students from 90 to 180. Thinnes and four instructors, three teaching ballet and one teaching hip hop and jazz, currently work with around 90 children.

In addition to a green room with a small kitchen and restrooms with showers, the first floor will have a studio space for younger students. It will have 1,176 square feet and a low ceiling. That type of smaller practice space is good for younger students because it gives them less room on which to focus, Thinnes said. A cavernous space can be distracting because children tend to want to stare at the ceiling.

A 1,500-square-foot practice room will be just across the hall. It is about the size of the NBE's current practice space.

The new facility also will feature a 2,974-square-foot studio for advanced dancers. The studio can be changed into a

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performance space for demonstrations for parents and the community. It will have acoustic panels hanging from the ceiling to provide warm sound.

Upstairs, the renovation will add a mezzanine level for three offices. Thinnes' office will have windows overlooking the largest practice studio. There also will be a 938-square-foot Pilates studio upstairs, which Pilates Central Memphis will lease.

"Moms can drop their child off at ballet, do their workout and then pick them up at the end of class," Thinnes said.

Exclusive inclusion

The second level also will have a conference room and a family waiting area, as well as a costume storage room that could serve as a technical booth if the NBE uses sound and lights for a show.

NBE's core program is for students as young as 4 years old who are trying to learn ballet as a vocation.

The training is available for inner-city children, and if a student is eligible for free or reduced lunch in Memphis City Schools, he or she is eligible for a full scholarship to NBE.

"Ballet has always been exclusive," Thinnes said. "This is going to be exclusive in that you have to be committed and gifted to study in the core program, but you don't have to have a lot of money."

Students from NBE perform at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art six times a year and at outdoor festivals such as the annual Cooper-Young Festival and the South Main Street trolley tours, as well as in area schools.

The ensemble could bring people to Midtown who might not visit otherwise, Thinnes said. The school attracts students from as far as Collierville, Olive Branch and Arlington.

"If they come in, they might go to the House of

Mews (a nearby non-profit feline rescue agency), have a cup of coffee at the Java Cabana or have lunch at one of the restaurants," Thinnes said. "What we have in Midtown is the closest thing we have to an Uptown New Orleans or a hip neighborhood in Washington, D.C., or Seattle. It's our Greenwich Village."

Shall we dance?

NBE already has several connections to the Cooper-Young neighborhood. In addition to being president of the Cooper-Young Business Association, Charlie Ryan also is on NBE's board.

"I think it's a wonderful compliment to the whole neighborhood and the business community," Ryan said. "I think it perfectly compliments everything from the antique area to the restaurants."

The Cooper-Young neighborhood was different 20 years ago, when there weren't as many people in the area, Ryan said. At that time, many businesses on the corner of Cooper Street and Young Avenue were boarded up. The CYBA started in 1988 and now counts more than 70 businesses as members. The NBE's relocation can be seen as part of that upswing.

"The New Ballet Ensemble and School's expansion is a great development for the Cooper Young neighborhood," said Katie Bruneau, director of the Cooper-Young Business Association. "With Katie Thinnes' commitment to excellence and to giving children of all backgrounds the opportunity to dance, they will contribute much to the community."