

LONG ISLAND PRESS



For Olga Berest, the story of [Berest Dance Center](#) did not begin with a business plan or a grand vision. It began with one dance class.

Fifty years later, that single class has grown into a Port Washington institution with more than 77 classes, 12 faculty members and generations of students who have gone on to professional careers in dance.

Berest, the studio's founder and owner, said the school's growth has always been driven by the needs and interests of its students rather than a predetermined plan.

"I actually didn't have a vision," Berest said. "I just wanted to teach."

Berest began her career as a speech therapist at the Willowbrook State School in Staten Island, where she developed a language program for nonverbal children. She found that movement was one of the ways she could connect with her students.

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Berest had trained in dance throughout college, despite being discouraged by her Greek grandparents from pursuing it professionally. Her experience at Willowbrook ultimately helped shape the creative movement approach she continues to use at her studio today.

"I had a passion to teach dance," she said.

After returning to Long Island, Berest began teaching classes in Queens before moving back to Manhasset, where she grew up. In 1976, she began teaching a single class at the American Legion Hall, the same place where she had trained as a child.

The class quickly grew. As students wanted more opportunities, Berest added teachers and new styles, eventually moving the school to Port Washington.

“It grew out of necessity,” she said.

Ballet was added when Berest’s own daughters, then 8 and 10, wanted to study the discipline. When students wanted jazz, she hired a jazz teacher. When they wanted repertory, she brought in a teacher to offer it.

The process continued for decades.

Berest spent 17 years in a rented facility before moving to the school’s current location at 12 South Washington St. 30 years ago. The building provided three floors of studio space, allowing the school to expand dramatically.

“I tripled my enrollment,” Berest said.



Olga Berest (C.) with seniors in her dance studio.

As the dance center grew, so did its role in the community. Berest became involved in programs including the Port Washington Children's Center and the Parent Resource Center, while also participating in community events such as Port Fest.

The school has also developed an outreach program that Berest considers a potential legacy. Dance for Joy, which began in 2021 shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, has grown from a 10-week initiative into a seven-year outreach program supporting 18 families.

Students have increasingly helped shape the center's community initiatives. One student proposed a pop-up store to raise money for Dance for Joy, while another recently developed the idea for Steady Steps, a free program designed to support serious student dancers.

With the help of a mental health counselor — Berest's youngest daughter, Alison — the program is being developed for students beginning in their sophomore year who are serious about dance. Hearts PW has provided funding for the initiative.

Berest said those programs reflect the philosophy that has guided her for five decades: respond to what students need in the present.

"You have to keep them involved. You have to keep them interested. You have to keep them motivated," she said.

That philosophy has also helped produce generations of professional dancers. Five of the center's 12 faculty members are professional alumni, and two alumni who now teach at the school continue to perform professionally.

Among the faculty members who have been with Berest for decades is Karen Ferby Guy, who began teaching at the studio in 1979. Linda Zoffer, the center's ballet founder, also helped shape its growth after Berest moved to the current location.

Berest's daughter Heather, her first alumna to pursue a professional career, joined her as a partner in 2001 after ending her stage career. Other professional alumni have returned to teach after their own careers on stage, continuing the cycle of students becoming teachers. Berest, the center's reputation for serious training is something to embrace rather than avoid.



Repertory back stage.

“We are serious about training, we are serious about being respectful to the art,” she said. “We are serious about being respectful to each other and to teachers and to the work ethic.”

But seriousness, she emphasized, does not mean a lack of joy.

“We are also very seriously playful, and joyful, and passionate about everything that we do,” she said.

Berest Dance Center will mark its 50th anniversary with a gala on Aug. 30 at 6 p.m. at the Jeanne Rimsky Theater in Port Washington. A pre-cocktail reunion for former students, alumni and members of the Berest community will take place from 3 to 5 p.m.

“This is a celebration of generations, of reunions of students that had seen their teacher since they were at the Berest Dance Center,” Berest said.

She expects the event to be emotional, with alumni performances, memories from former teachers and remarks from her three daughters about growing up in a household centered around the dance studio.

The celebration will end with a kick line and an invitation for guests to join in a final toast.

Berest said she has a personal story connected to nearly everyone attending.

“Unlike most galas, I know everybody who is coming, and I have a story with each of them,” she said.

After 50 years, she said the greatest reward has not been what she has given to her students, but what they have given back to her.

“It’s what I have been given every day of school that I can still wake up in the morning, and I can’t wait to connect with people,” Berest said.

For Berest, that connection remains the heart of the dance center — and the reason the story that began with one class continues to grow.