

# OREGON **BALLET** THEATRE

**PRESS CONTACT:** Stephanie Chadwick  
Interim Chief Advancement Officer  
PHONE: 503.444.2703  
EMAIL: Stephanie.Chadwick@obt.org

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## **Oregon Ballet Theatre Celebrates 35 Year Partnership with Albina Head Start**

*The close of OBT's 24/25 Season marks not only OBT's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary, but also the 35<sup>th</sup> year of OBT'S partnership with Albina Head Start*

PORTLAND, OR – Oregon Ballet Theatre has introduced classrooms of excited and inquisitive preschool students from Albina Head Start to the world of dance for the past 35 years. This partnership has provided and will continue to provide an invaluable bridge between a diverse group of students and the art form of ballet. Through dance sessions in their classrooms, field trips to the OBT studios, and no-cost tickets to George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*, OBT and AHS have been committed to inspiring a love of movement within students for decades.



Albina Head Start students exploring creative movement on a field trip to OBT Studios

The initial connection between OBT and AHS was made by Joe Wyatt, former OBT Principal dancer and the first Director of OBT School. He and his late wife Elena Carter came to

Portland after dancing with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, a company dedicated to giving Black dancers opportunities to perform.

“I always want to find a way to continue the legacy of Dance Theatre of Harlem and develop opportunities for dancers of color. That was when I thought of teaming up with Ron Herndon, head of the Albina Ministerial Alliance, to have preschoolers in their Head Start program exposed to creative movement,” Wyatt said. “With \$1,000 from the school budget, the goal was to send teachers from OBT School to one of their centers and introduce preschoolers to dance. With support from OBT’s board and local companies, the program expanded over time. One outstanding teacher, Kasandra Gruener, took over the program and took it to new heights.”

Kasandra, who was with OBT from 1992-2020 says “As Oregon Ballet Theatre looks back on 35 years of offering multi-faceted ballet experiences to our broad community both onstage and off, I reflect on the many unique and worthy partnerships that have been forged. There is one partnership that I hold especially dear to my heart, for we have sustained and grown our work together since OBT’s earliest years. That partnership is with Albina Head Start.”



Former OBT Education Director Kasandra Gruener in an AHS classroom

Albina Head Start is dedicated to providing child development and family support services to low-income families. Through their partnership with OBT, Albina has also made arts education accessible, recognizing the importance of movement for young students. It is the hope of both organizations that students may recognize dance as a joyful activity, a means to explore other topics, and as an opportunity for them to continue to pursue in the future, whether as a hobby or a profession.

“OBT is a wonderful partnership for Albina,” shared Ann Obuhoro Site Coordinator and 34-year employee of Albina Head Start. “When we first started the partnership with OBT, Kasandra was one of the first teachers. She brought so much knowledge not only to the children and families, but she also inspired me and other teachers to gain a better understanding of what ballet was all about.” Obuhoro continues, “She encouraged and inspired so many children and staff from Albina over the years. Albina is so fortunate to continue our partnership with OBT.”



OBT's Kasandra Gruener and AHS Site Coordinator Ann Obuhoro.

“It is hard to describe the awe and impact this program has on the children and their families. Otherwise boisterous, the children sit speechless, raptly watching the rigor, skill and focus of the company dancers at work when they visit OBT. Everyone - kiddos, AHS teachers, family chaperones and OBT dancers are smiling,” said Gruener. “The power of this partnership builds more than a love of ballet. The welcoming nature of it blurs the notion of ballet for an elite group only. It presents a physical example of what can happen when one focuses and perseveres at a very difficult task. “



Teaching Artist and Speaker Brook Manning hosting a field trip for AHS students.

These field trips leave a lasting impression on young students. Weeks after a studio visit, one child reflected on what they learned during their visit to OBT. She said, “I am a dancer, I saw dancers, and I can be a dancer.”

“And that pretty much sums up everything we’re trying to do!” says current OBT Director of Education and Community Engagement, Robyn Ulibarri.

“I hope that our AHS/OBT partnership continues in the way it always has, with support, respect for what we each do and of course love, shares Sarah Brown, OBT Community Partnership Specialist. “I hope that any AHS student who wants to continue dancing has the support and opportunity, and those students that don’t wish to continue have happy memories of dancing together.”





OBT Community Partnership Specialist Sarah Ward-Brown dancing in an AHS classroom

This program is the product of many teachers, support staff, administrators, and Teaching Artists' belief in the power of movement. OBT is thrilled to celebrate the 35th anniversary of this partnership with Albina Head Start and is excited about future anniversaries to come.



AHS student at OBT studios

## **ABOUT ALBINA HEAD START**

Albina Head Start (AHS), a federally funded non-profit organization, AHS serves nearly 900 low-income and underserved children from birth through age five at more than 20 locations around Portland – including health, nutrition and social services, along with cognitive development programs from birth to age five and family resources for prenatal moms and teen parents. AHS has been serving children and families in Portland since the inception of the Head Start Program in 1965.

## **ABOUT OBT**

OBT is the largest professional ballet company in Oregon, employing over 300 people and attracting artists from around the globe with our reputation for excellence. The company is rooted in the traditions of classical ballet, with a repertoire that ranges from the great classics to premieres from some of the most exciting choreographic voices in the field today, including our own Artistic Director, Dani Rowe. Our mission is dedicated to the vitality of, and access to, world-class ballet performance and training in our region.

In addition to our 5-show main stage season, we introduce students to ballet and the importance of lifelong movement through our education and community engagement programs, and we train dancers from three years old to 80 years old through the professional and recreational classes at the Oregon Ballet Theatre School. Many of our students go on to successful professional careers at companies including the Joffrey, the Dutch National Ballet, and within our own organization.

World class art, locally made since 1989.

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