



Bernice's Starrstep Dance Studio

80 years of making dancers feel special

By Sophia Emigh

Eleven-year-old Bernice Miller stood on a chair to teach her first ballet class to neighborhood kids with as much authority as she could muster. It was the fall of 1929, and her "studio" was her parents' two-level garage in Pensacola, Florida. Eighty years later,

Bernice Miller Burlingame, at the wheel beside her sister Jeannine (who remains in charge backstage at recitals to this day), spreads the word about her Pensacola, Florida, dance studio in the 1950s.

Bernice's daughter, Starr Burlingame, carries on her legacy as director of Bernice's Starrstep Dance Studio. Starr chalks up the longevity of the school to her mother's zeal for her work and treatment of her students with respect and acceptance.

When Bernice fell ill with typhoid in 1925, her doctor prescribed ballet to heal her legs, which had borne the brunt of the disease. She took dance classes in Pensacola and, starting at age 11, spent her summers in

Chicago, where she lived with family friends and took advantage of the city's broader range of dance classes.

Back home, meanwhile, Bernice had launched what she dubbed "Bernice's Dance Studio." Says Starr, "She never thought about going out and performing at all. It was her passion—a word she used quite a lot. She really wanted to teach."

The studio blossomed as word of mouth drew neighborhood kids. Expanding her repertoire beyond



LEFT: Bernice Miller took advantage of Chicago's range of dance classes in the 1940s, and tap was her favorite. ABOVE: Dee Dee Dunn, at left with Starr Burlingame, has danced at what's now Bernice's Starrstep Dance Studio for 38 years and taught there for 20. OPPOSITE TOP: Bernice Miller Burlingame, center, at her last recital in 1989 with her daughter and successor, Starr Burlingame, right. At left is Robyn Wicke Hicks, who stopped teaching two years ago after more than 30 years with the studio. OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Bernice Burlingame and the late Joyce Wicke, seen in the 1960s, taught together for 35 years.

ballet and tap (her favorite discipline) during World War II, Bernice, then in her early 20s, started teaching ballroom classes, primarily to military personnel from Pensacola's naval base. Her mother would make home-cooked meals for the military men who came in for classes, many of whom kept in touch with the family until they died, even corresponding with Starr after Bernice's death.

During the war, Bernice met Jim Burlingame, a drummer who had left his home in Ohio at 17 to travel with big bands and play for the Marine Corps. Traveling through Pensacola, he played for a USO show Bernice was dancing in. After corresponding with Bernice during the war (years after her mother's death, Starr found a stack of letters Jim had written to Bernice), Jim returned to Pensacola to marry her. They named their daughter Starr after Jim's favorite song, Hoagy

Carmichael's "Stardust," which also happened to be the tune Bernice had been dancing to when Jim met her.

Starr says that Bernice taught at several iterations of her studio "until she absolutely couldn't anymore," finally succumbing to the last in a series of cancers in 1989. Starr speaks with reverence about her mother's strength and gifts as a teacher. "She absolutely loved what she did. She had a real knack with the younger children; teaching the little tiny ones, you've got to have the right person. She always made it fun. She treated both parents and students with total respect."

Carrying on her mother's vision was a natural progression for Starr, who had essentially grown up in the studio. She started teaching there at 13 and was on the books by 16; her mother wanted her to learn the business of running a school, not just how to teach. Starr decided not to

tour as a performer because of her mother's failing health, instead earning a BFA in dance at Florida State University. She taught at Pensacola Junior College (PJC) for 21 years and served as artistic director of PJC Dance Theater for seven years, where many students from her studio ended up dancing.

Starr assumed leadership of what became Bernice's Starrstep Dance Studio, now Pensacola's oldest school for dance, in 1989 upon her mother's death. She teaches classes daily and runs the show in a studio she built nine years ago. Although she has kept up with the times in terms of class offerings, she has made no radical changes to her mother's mission or philosophy. Whenever someone had a hardship, Bernice would say, "C'mon, let them take dance."

"The core of the business is the same," Starr says. "It's not about mak-



ing money, especially in the past few years; the important thing is to make it possible for students to keep dancing in these hard times. We do as much as we can [to help]. I think people respect that." She is humble about her role in continuing her mother's legacy and creating her own: "It's just what I was meant to do."

Yet it's Starr's dedication to forging lifelong relationships with her stu-

dents that carries the studio forward into its ninth decade. "We truly care about our families," says the school owner. "There's no partiality. If some child is extremely talented and another has two left feet, they're both treated equally." The school's 200-odd devoted students are a testament to its warm and unconditional welcome. "With third- and fourth-generation students in the studio,

every day I have someone tell me what a wonderful person my mother was and how respected she was," Starr says. Even outside the studio, she constantly runs into people who say, "Oh, I took dancing from your mother!"

Juanita Glass is one such person. "I am now in my 70s, but I took dance from Bernice from the first grade on for some years," recalls



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—Starr Burlingame

Top photo courtesy Starr Burlingame; bottom photo by Don Barnes Photographers



Starr Burlingame with students at a summer dance workshop at Pensacola Junior College in 2001.

Glass, now of Lexington, South Carolina. "Also, my granddaughter took dance from Bernice when she was in grade school. Bernice was my idol and the person whose standards I always tried to meet."

Even as her illnesses took their toll, Bernice returned to the studio as a source of strength to help her keep going, teaching as often as her poor health allowed. Starr is grateful for the people who supported the family through those difficult times and attributes their presence to her mother's investment in the sense of community fostered there. "She had a lot to do with [the kind of people at the studio]. Good people draw good people."

Starr emphasizes this sense of valued community throughout the year, sponsoring parades, parties, and other gatherings for students and families outside of the classroom. She cherishes the resulting bond between dancers that she hasn't found any-

where else and feels like she's been part of raising many of the school's students. When they leave the studio, she describes feeling like she's "losing a child," a blow that is softened when children of previous students begin their own cycle of dance education.

Like Starr, her teachers count themselves lucky to be part of molding the lives of young people. And like the school, all of them have proved to have longevity, studying there before coming on board

as teachers. One of them, Dee Dee Dunn, has danced at the studio for 38 years and taught there for 20.

"When I talk about the studio I am telling about my family," says Dunn. "I have taught my niece, my dad, my brother, my great-nephew, my daughter, my son, a few cousins, and many friends' children. The students I have taught over the years are all my 'kids.' "

The Burlingame commitment to nurturing each child has continued

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into the new millennium. The school’s longstanding reputation for teaching excellent technique in a family atmosphere has obliterated the need for advertising. With students ranging from toddlers to octogenarians and classes that run the gamut from hip-hop to ballet, Bernice’s Starrstep Dance Studio is a well-rounded, family-oriented school, not a specialty competition-focused studio.

The studio’s online mission statement emphasizes that making learning as enjoyable as possible is equal in importance as high-quality dance training. A Starrstep education is less about learning technical tricks than “dancing from the soul,” says Starr. “That’s what it’s really supposed to be about, the joy of it. It’s not just about how flashy you can be.” Beyond classes for kids, the school also boasts a popular seniors program with a focus on tap. “They don’t just get out there and look cute, they really do tap,” says the school owner. “We have three 82-year-olds in the program, and two of them are men. They dance in the recital every year, and they steal the show!”

Ultimately, Starr wants students to leave her school feeling that they’ve received high-quality dance training, had a good time in the process, and felt supported the whole way through. “[Bernice] started that, and that’s what we’ve continued. You can make people feel special when they come in the door.”

With the 80th-anniversary recital coming up in June, Starr is planning a dance production involving

several generations of dancers, a photographic tribute to her mother, and a solo performance for herself—not just as Bernice’s protégé but as her loving daughter. “She was truly a one-of-a-kind person, one of the strongest women I’ve ever met,” says Starr. “I only hope I can be half as strong as she was. She was a phenomenal woman.” ♦



Bernice Miller Burlingame and her daughter, Starr, attend a concert of the Gulf Coast Dance Alliance at which Bernice was honored in 1989, about six months before her death.



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