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Ballet program founders in the wake of a tough dispute

By **LESLIE BROWN**

Vashon-Maury Island Beachcomber Editor
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For the first time in more than a decade, Vashon Junior Civic Ballet won't be producing "The Nutcracker" this winter due to a painful dispute that has riven the company and put a temporary halt to the Island's only free ballet program.

The Vashon Park District, concerned about the dispute and frustrated by the amount of staff time spent trying to help the parties resolve their differences, cancelled its contract with Vashon Island Community Ballet — a reconstituted version of the program — two weeks ago. The move means the park district will no longer sponsor the free program and that dancers will no longer have a place to rehearse in the months leading up to its annual winter production. The park district's contract with the company ends Sept. 29.

"The internal conflicts of the community of ballet parents have become so protracted that the cost to the district in management time cannot be justified," Wendy Braicks, the park district's executive director, wrote in a Sept. 8 letter to the rival parties. "We strongly encourage you to resolve your conflicts internally and consider reorganizing in such a way that your governance structure more fully represents the broader community which you serve."

The dispute is hard on many of the dancers, some of whom have grown up in the small company. Juliana Goth, 16, was eagerly anticipating her 10th performance of "The Nutcracker" this winter, when she would be cast as the Sugar Plum Fairy.

"It makes me so sad," she said. "I was really looking forward to it."

"It's been a great support system for me," she added. "It's been wonderful, wonderful program."

At issue, in part, is who controls what was long known as Vashon Junior Civic Ballet (VJCB) — its founder and artistic director Betsy Frazee or the board of directors, newly chaired by Kamela Trujillo. To hear Trujillo explain the situation, the board decided to replace Frazee as the artistic director after she announced her resignation and walked out of a stormy meeting in July. Frazee, for her part, said the board couldn't remove her because it's her company and the board is simply advisory; instead, she said, she decided to form a new board and demanded that the "hostile" board, as she calls it, relinquish several set designs, costumes and the company's name.

Trujillo's group renamed itself, calling the program Vashon Island Community Ballet, turned over several of the items Frazee wanted and, with the park district's blessing, began to ready itself for this fall's regimen of rehearsals leading to its winter performance.

But as the dispute grew more intense — and the Park District's effort at pulling both sides together for mediation faltered — the public agency decided it would sever ties with what had been a long-standing park program. Classes, once taught by Frazee and now taught by her long-time assistant Kim Gallo, continue to be offered through the park district.

"There's been a lot of drama," said a clearly exasperated Susan McCabe, program coordinator for the Vashon Park District, who added that people on both sides of the issue have raised their voices at her over the course of the dispute.

"It's not our place to be settling a dispute between these two groups," McCabe added. "That's what they're having trouble accepting. ... This is an internal conflict, and they need to settle it."

Frazee, 64, a colorful and animated fixture in Vashon's dance scene, has long had both admirers and critics. While some have been frustrated by her quirky personality and the chaotic nature of her rehearsals, others call her gifted for the way she is able to incorporate dancers of different ages and skill levels into a performance, creating a program premised on support and egalitarianism rather than competition.

"I think it's a horrible, horrible loss to Vashon," parent Julie Shannon said of the park district's decision to cancel its contract with the program. Frazee, she added, "is a genius. ... I love the lady."

Trujillo, whose four children have danced with VJCB for years, said she also believes in the program, with its egalitarian approach and the fact that everyone who signs up — including children with disabilities — can participate in The Nutcracker.

"This program is totally different from anything else on the Island. ... The point of this company is not to turn out professional dancers but to foster a love of dance," she said.

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Conflicts arose this summer, however, over what started out as an innocuous request by Christine Juarez, the director of Vashon Allied Arts' ballet program. Juarez, who also puts on a Nutcracker performance, was struggling with her wintertime schedule and asked Vashon Junior Civic Ballet if she could swap dates at the Vashon High School theater, which is in near-constant demand during much of December.

Trujillo said the switch in dates didn't seem to make a difference, so she emailed the board suggesting VJCB agree to the swap. Unbeknownst to Trujillo, however, Frazee met with Juarez on her own and asked Juarez for a \$300 donation to VJCB for the switch; Frazee thought it was a reasonable request, since, under the arrangement, VJCB would give up 10 days and end up with seven.

"I said to Christine, 'Because we'd be losing some revenue, if you could make us whole, that would help.' We'd lose maybe \$300. I just threw it out there. She wasn't offended at all," Frazee recalled.

Juarez agreed. "We were in a position where our dates weren't working, so VAA was willing to bend over backwards to accommodate them," she said.

Some board members, however, were appalled. In an email to Frazee, copied to the rest of the board, Trujillo said it seemed like "extortion," since Juarez had said she'd have to cancel her show if she couldn't find another date. There was no "documentable harm" in trading dates, Trujillo wrote, adding that the request for money seemed petty.

"We have all been working very hard to rebrand ourselves and encourage new dancers to participate, but they will not come if the word on Vashon is that we took money from (the Blue Heron) because we felt slighted," Trujillo wrote.

Two days later, at a lengthy board meeting at Trujillo's house on July 23, the situation erupted. According to a five-page outline of events that Trujillo and four other board members emailed to parents of dancers in the program, board members tried to vote to not accept the funds but "were interrupted with personal attacks and told there was no need for a board."

Frazee, according to both sides in the dispute, called for the board's dissolution at the July 23 meeting — a move, according to Trujillo, the board reluctantly agreed to. But a few days later, McCabe, at the park district, told Trujillo that Frazee couldn't dissolve the board without park district involvement because of the program's \$4,000 in reserves, funds the park district holds for the program. What's more, McCabe told Trujillo the board would have to distribute the assets under state guidelines for dissolving a nonprofit; even as an advisory board, it had to function like a nonprofit board and couldn't just walk away from the situation, McCabe told the group.

Trujillo and the other parents on what was then the VJCB board got together a few days later and decided to move forward with the program — but without Frazee as the artistic director, according to Trujillo's five-page outline. Instead, the group hired Gallo as artistic director and began the work of establishing itself as a nonprofit. Frazee, meanwhile, told McCabe and Braicks she was done with the program and was stepping down altogether — prompting the park district to post a tribute to Frazee noting her departure on its website.

But Frazee disputes that description of the events, saying she resigned from teaching classes but not serving as the company's artistic director. She demanded that the article on the website be taken down, McCabe said. And in mid-August, after the park district signed a new contract with Trujillo's group, Frazee told McCabe and Trujillo she was forming a new board helmed by parent Michael Goth under the VJCB name and would begin preparing for a December production.

After several more back-and-forth discussions and after Frazee said she had contacted a lawyer and was considering a lawsuit, the park district cancelled its contract with Trujillo's group, releasing the dates that had been reserved for its Nutcracker performance in the high school theater. The park district's decision came a few days before casting and rehearsals were to begin for The Nutcracker.

Trujillo, in an interview, said she understands the reason for the park district's decision and adds that she and her colleagues on the board have tried hard to keep the dispute from becoming personal.

But she added that she's unhappy with Frazee and her supporters and the way they've comported themselves through the course of the conflict. "This whole thing has been a shock to us and really disappointing," she said. "They've put these families in the middle."

For her part, Frazee blames the park district for its handling of the dispute, saying that McCabe and others exacerbated the situation by giving Trujillo what Frazee calls "false information."

"I have paperwork that shows I'm a sole proprietorship. I'm trademarked," Frazee said. "The park district created the situation, and now they don't have the cojones to stand up and recognize they made a mistake."

She's also angry at Trujillo and the other parents, adding that the dispute has destroyed a long-running program. "It's just an absolute tragedy for the kids," she said.

But McCabe said the park district felt it had to walk away from the two factions and cancel the program, especially after its suggestion for mediation went nowhere. (Trujillo's group said it had nothing to mediate, while Frazee's side didn't take any steps toward trying to make such a process take place, McCabe said.) McCabe said the park district consulted its lawyer, in part because of Frazee's mention of a potential lawsuit — but it wasn't the threat of legal action that triggered the park district's decision. "It's that there's such a split in the dance community, and the dispute is so vehement," she said.

LuAnn Branch, who chairs the park district board, met with Frazee and some of the parents who support her in August and, after realizing the depth of the differences, agreed with the decision to cancel the program. But she said she's sorry that it's come to this and hopes the dispute will eventually be resolved.

"I think it's just sad all the way around," she said.

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riconkim 4 weeks ago

I am sad that there is NO MENTION of the program thrat IDT (Island Dance Theatre) is running on Saturdays. This is my best attempt to keep this type of program functioning, though it is not free (\$25 a season, 2 seasons a year) & we do NOT get the use of the VHS theatre, we still have over 30 dancers (including Goth & Shannon, mentioned in article) who ARE in rehearsal for "Winter Wonderland", where they will be performing excerpts from the Nutcracker & other Christmas Carols. We may be downsized costume wise, but the show must go on! Feel free to stop by & see how we are doing, Saturdays 12-4 at Ober park

Kim Gallo- Director, IDT

PS- this should be seen as a lesson to all: you have to play the cards you are dealt-Deal & move on

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