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DANCE

A Patron With Passion in Los Angeles

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The philanthropist Glorya Kaufman, whose donation will provide for a dance school at the University of Southern California, at her house in Beverly Hills. Al Seib/Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES

THIS sprawling city is known internationally for many things — but great dance isn't one of them. The philanthropist Glorya Kaufman is doing her best to change that. In November the University of Southern California announced that Ms. Kaufman had donated enough money to start a dance school, a prospective Juilliard of the West. Though the exact sum has not been disclosed, it's big.

Robert Cutietta, the dean of the Thornton School of Music at U.S.C. and the man who will now head that university's Glorya Kaufman School of Dance, confirmed that the figure was in the multimillion-dollar range. The money will go to a new building — the Glorya Kaufman International Dance Center — and to endowing a bachelor of fine arts program combining conservatory-style dance instruction with business training and a liberal arts education.

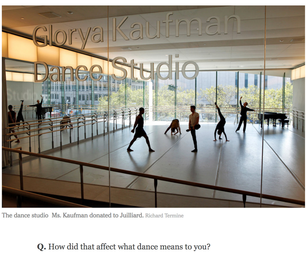
While this is probably the largest check that Ms. Kaufman has written for dance, it's far from the first. She's lavished millions on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Juilliard School, her dance foundation helps finance community charities, and the $20 million she donated to the Music Center in Los Angeles in 2009 helps bring major dance companies, like American Ballet Theater, to the city with the Glorya Kaufman Presents Dance series. The $18 million gift she gave the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1999, which set records back then, resulted in Glorya Kaufman Hall, but also in a dissatisfied Glorya Kaufman.

Ms. Kaufman's husband, Donald Kaufman, founded (with Eli Broad) the hugely successful homebuilding company Kaufman & Broad (now known as KB Home). In 1983 Mr. Kaufman died in a biplane crash; he was the pilot, and his passenger, his son-in-law, also died. Not long afterward Ms. Kaufman turned to charity work.

Last month she discussed her dance philanthropy with Brian Seibert at her house in Beverly Hills, an Italian-style villa outfitted in art, including her own paintings. Ms. Kaufman, who prefers not to give her age, grew up during the Depression in Detroit, and she retains the accent and friendliness of a Midwesterner. Her reflexively positive nature might also be seen as Midwestern, or perhaps as Californian — and appropriately so, since she's decided to make her mark here. These are excerpts from the conversation.

Q. Why is dance so important to you?

A. I grew up with dance. All the articles about me say I danced on my dad's toes before I could walk, and I did. He loved to dance. And when I was a schoolgirl, I belonged to a girls club. We would have the boys clubs come over to one of our homes to dance with us in our rec rooms. Nobody took lessons, but we knew all the steps.



The dance studio Ms. Kaufman donated to Juilliard. Richard Termine

Q. How did that affect what dance means to you?

A. I grew up loving what dance did. I think dance gave me confidence.

Q. That's why you wanted to found a school?

A. I could've given money to a lot of different things, which I do, but I thought, this is something that brings joy, and I don't think we have enough of it. I wanted to make a change. I wanted to make kids and people happy, because I was happy.

Q. Is that what drives your philanthropy?

A. Recently I met a student I sponsor through the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A. program. He was a natural, and he'll definitely make it, but he wouldn't have had a chance to do anything [without a scholarship]. He came up and hugged me, and oh my God, it felt so good! To change a life!

Q. Does dance have a social function in your mind?

A. Big time. It gives you self-esteem, posture. You know how to walk into a room. It teaches you traditions and cultures, and that makes you — I don't like the word "tolerant" — but it makes you open. Dance opens up the world.

Q. Why did you choose U.S.C.? Was it because you were unhappy with U.C.L.A.?

A. I don't like to talk about it. Let's just say I was disappointed with U.C.L.A. They weren't able to realize my vision. They couldn't have a B.F.A. [program]. That really tells it all.

Q. But your experience with U.S.C. has been different?

A. With a private university I can accomplish what I couldn't with a state university. We can hire anybody from anywhere to teach. We can get the best students in the world.

Q. So you have more control over quality?

A. Absolutely.

Q. How did the relationship with U.S.C. come about?

Ms. Kaufman with the dancer Desmond Richardson. Steve Cohn/University of Southern California

A. They were courting me, even though they were pretending they were not. The dean will say it was a coincidence, but I was very aware. I told them, "You don't have a dance program," even though I knew they had a little one. We talked about a school. They wanted infinity, and I gave them the moon.

Q. Why don't you want to disclose the sum?

A. I'm so tired of everyone saying: "You gave this much to Juilliard. You gave this much to the Music Center." It annoys me, to tell you the truth. It's like: "How many acres do you have? How old are you?" What does that serve?

Q: What role do you see the school playing in the Los Angeles dance scene?

A. It's not just going to be Los Angeles. It's going to be international. These dancers will be known all over the world. And L.A. will now have the reputation of being a little more cultural. You know New York and San Francisco have been putting us down forever.

Q. An opinion article in The Los Angeles Times suggested that a better use of philanthropic money would've been to finance the day-to-day operations of local dance companies. How do you respond?

A. I heard the same thing when I funded a library in Brentwood. They said, "Why are you giving money to a wealthy place instead of, say, Watts?" But the city would be paying for Watts, and they would never do anything for Brentwood. Now it's one of the most used libraries in the city. What we really need is dance in the schools, but no one person can do all that. Maybe someone with a little more money. [She laughs.]

Q. What do you see as your role in the new school?

A. I don't do anything unless I'm involved, because that's no fun. And besides, they're using my name. I better like it! So I'm going to be part of the design of the building and the curriculum. I asked Stephen Rountree, president of the Music Center, if our students could use the Music Center facilities. My friend Joseph Polisi [the president of Juilliard] told me he wanted the two schools to work together. A few weeks ago I ran into Rachel Moore, the executive director of American Ballet Theater, and she said, "Glorya, I want to partner." It's just bigger than I thought. I could cry, I'm so excited.

Q. It sounds as if these connections happen to you all the time.

A.: It's because I'm open. I think life is really hard. Sometimes it's awful. So if you have a chance to smile, boy that's for me.

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