



A FRESH TAKE

TV program Road Trip Masters will highlight area's lesser-known regional gems. Page 12A

THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 2017 || Serving Williamsburg, James City & York since 1736

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANDRA BALESTRACCI

For more than two decades, Sandra Balestracci has taught students at the Eastern Virginia School for the Performing Arts on Pocahontas Trail. Before that, she performed in New York City and around the world as a professional ballet dancer.

Ballerina nurtures a new generation

Worldly dancer turned local teacher instills a love of art

BY SETH BIRKENMEYER
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Ballerina Sandra Balestracci performed in some of the finest venues in New York City, across the country and around the globe. She's also devoted years to fostering the next generation with her local performing arts school. As she turned 75 Tuesday, Balestracci reflected on a life of success as an artist and her means of paying it forward.

"She had tremendous range. She could do anything," said Ellen Ferne Glemby, Balestracci's friend of 47 years and a fellow dancer who performed alongside her at the Lincoln Center. Glemby praised her friend's ability to tackle modern and neoclassical styles. "She turned like a top. A true, true professional in so many ways."

Balestracci and her husband, Ron Boucher,

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Balestracci assists Katherine Wong, one of her many students at Eastern Virginia School for the Performing Arts.

CW moves forward on outsourcing services

Retail, golf course and facilities upkeep all under private management

BY ROBERT BRAUCHLE
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WILLIAMSBURG — Colonial Williamsburg executed contracts to outsource employment at its golf course less than a month after foundation CEO and President Mitchell Reiss announced there would be changes to the organization's structure.

In an open letter to the public in late June, Reiss announced Colonial Williamsburg would outsource several functions on the commercial side of the organization as a way of generating more money. A national golf course manager took over Golden Horseshoe Golf Club three weeks later.

In total, the moves are expected to reduce expenses and increase profits by about \$5 million during the first full year, said Jeff Duncan, Colonial Williamsburg executive director of property planning, resources and insurance.

The changes include:

- KemperSports took over golf course operations July 21.
- Brightview Landscapes began work Aug. 1.
- The College of William and Mary took over operations of the Kimball Theatre on Aug. 1.
- Aramark Corp. took over the retail shops Aug. 1.
- WFF started overseeing facilities management Sept. 1.

Colonial Williamsburg will also expand its use of a private commercial real estate manager to drum up tenants at the organization's retail and office spaces, including in Merchants Square, Duncan said.

Declining to disclose individual contract amounts, Duncan said the largest chunk of outsourcing involved the organization's retail and e-commerce operations, which included 160 employees.

Retail and products brought in a \$6.1 million profit in 2015, according to Colonial Williamsburg's publicly available tax records. The organization has not filed paperwork for 2016; it is typically made available near the end of the year, in late fall or winter.

"(Aramark) will totally own that, he said. "They will be Aramark em-

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Saturday, Oct. 28, 2017: 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.
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Mail Absentee Voting
Tuesday, Oct. 31, 2017: Last day to request an absentee ballot by mail. Applications must be received in the JCC Voter Registration and Elections Office by 5 p.m.
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Dianna S. Moorman, General Registrar and Director of Elections
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COURTESY OF SANDRA BALESTRACCI

Balestracci stands before her young performers after their latest performance of "The Nutcracker" at the Ferguson Center for the Arts in 2016.

Ballerina

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run the Eastern Virginia School for the Performing Arts in Williamsburg. That institution is the culmination of a lifetime devoted to her artistry and the pursuit of perfection.

At 3 years old, Balestracci's mother initially compelled her to begin performing; it heralded the dawn of years of schooling across New Bedford, Mass., as well as Boston. Through all that time spent honing her craft, Balestracci still didn't anticipate a career in the arts. But one particularly noteworthy instructor changed that. Harriet Hocht, who performed in films such as "The Great Ziegfeld" and danced with Fred Astaire, encouraged her to try her luck in New York City.

So, in 1963, Balestracci drove from Boston Music Hall to Radio City Music Hall.

"I went there and had my first real audition," Balestracci said. She performed for Marc Platt, an agent Hocht knew.

"He liked me right away."

After a callback, she was accepted into Radio City's ballet company, where she worked as a soloist until 1979. She would perform several shows a year while also teaching a ballet class. During that time, she appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

At one point, Rockettes founder and director Russell Markert asked Balestracci to perform in one of his shows, which involved six women and eight men.

One move, which involved one of the men throwing her into the air for another to catch, proved particularly fateful. Instead of landing in his arms, she landed on her head.

"I couldn't move. I was paralyzed," Balestracci said. She also suffered a concussion. Once her little toe regained movement, doctors were confident she would recover.

"But I would probably never dance again," she recalled.

A week later, she could move her neck. Eventually, after further recovery, she returned to work, eager to return to her

passion. The choreographer approved her for more dancing. But she made sure to avoid that particular lift.

"I went back to the doctor and said, 'I'm dancing again,' and he couldn't believe it," Balestracci said. She still had plenty of shows left in her.

From 6th Avenue to Route 60

Balestracci also spent time attending ballet classes in Manhattan, where she was taught by many famous teachers then in New York City. She also continued teaching whenever possible classes at Carnegie Hall and other institutions along the way.

Additionally, Balestracci worked with a New York City Opera choreographer who operated a small touring company. She said one of the highlights of performing with them was visiting parts of the country that typically weren't exposed

See *Ballerina*, page 9A

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Ballerina

Continued from 8A

to such art forms.

"They never thought they would ever see anything of that nature, and it was a pleasure to perform for people who have never seen ballet before," Balestracci said. "They loved it. It was nice to bring that into their lives."

After dancing in Paris, Peru, Panama and other worldly destinations, she brought that experience with her as she settled down in Williamsburg.

From 1979 to 1984, Balestracci served as artistic director for the Virginia State Ballet, which had a Williamsburg studio. She spent the first year teaching in New York; that meant four days in Williamsburg and three in Manhattan every week. When she had her son, she decided to stick to Williamsburg.

After that ballet gig, she spent time working at another local contemporary ballet theater. In 1992, she decided it was time to teach. Thus, she and Boucher founded the EVSPA in the Village Shops at Kingsmill on Pocahontas Trail.

The couple had previously grown up together as friends in New Bedford.

"There was always the intent to marry her from the age of 15," Boucher said.

But that love didn't coalesce for some time. She did, however, urge him to come out to the Big Apple, where he also joined the New York City Opera. The friends worked together, but they married other people and had children. In 1992, fate intervened when Balestracci needed help in the endeavor that led to the EVSPA.

"I came down and the rest is history," Boucher said. "Every person who would see Sandra perform would articulate how incredibly vibrant, electrifying, she was onstage. She was just

as electrifying in a classroom, teaching."

Balestracci demands of her students what the stage demanded of her throughout her life.

"She remains true to her art form," Boucher said. "She will not water it down. She demands the same respect that her teachers demanded of her."

High expectations for high art

The school teaches more than 100 students at a time, although the pair aims to keep individual classes small and intimate. They share the course load, which spans ballet, musical theater and voice, fostering children as young as 3 and adults alike. Balestracci serves as artistic director; Boucher is the school's founding director.

"I love teaching the basics and watching them progress over the years and watching them grow," Balestracci said. "If they have a good technical foundation, they can proceed with a better knowledge and understanding of what the art form is."

Balestracci said she works 10 hours a day, six days a week on average, and sometimes seven days a week. Her efforts span multiple classes, private lessons and administrative aspects.

Balestracci emphasizes professionalism, even among her youngest pupils. Many of her students go on to careers in the performing arts. One such student, Samantha Berger, dances as a Radio City Rockette.

"I take pride in what I teach and how I choreograph and how I get the girls and the boys to get to another level," she said. "You have to be creative. Each year, it gets better and better."

Still, they wanted to perform ballets, and the EVSPA couldn't afford to do so on its own. In 2000, they created the Community Alliance for the Performing

Arts Fund, which garners support from public and private sectors.

Through that, they've performed 10 musical theater productions and, in what's perhaps their most iconic contribution to the local arts community, they've done 16 annual performances of "The Nutcracker." For the past 13 years, they've done so at the Ferguson Center for the Arts in Newport News.

In the midst of guest artists such as José Carreño, whom Balestracci lauded for his world-famous abilities, much of the cast is comprised of her students.

"Even if they were students, it didn't matter," said Glemby, who's also helped out as the videographer for the "Nutcracker" performances for 15 years. She also emphasized her friend's professional expectations, adding that learning such determination and discipline helps the students, whether they choose to further pursue the performing arts or not. "It's a great platform for jumping off into life."

Glemby said she's lucky to call Balestracci her friend, and the Williamsburg area is lucky to have someone of her caliber in their midst.

"Her influence on countless lives, and on society as a whole, is a testament to Sandra's life work and to the vocation she chose, and loves," she said.

Even after teaching thousands of students, including some of their children, Balestracci isn't interested in slowing down now.

"An artist doesn't retire often, because of their passion," Boucher said.

Balestracci is still going strong at 75.

"As long as my feet are working, I'll be involved in the dance world on some level," Balestracci said.

Birkenmeyer can be reached by phone at 757-790-3029.

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