

“We are brainiacs, not just artists, and we try to instill that in the kids here — let them know you can dance and go to college.”

— LILIANA SOMMA, co-owner of the School of Dance and Music



Bruce Hazelton/Staff Photographer

Autumn Webb instructs 4- and 5-year-old dancers Laine Weston, Cara Stern, Elise Adler, Brynn Levin and Catherine Davodi in a ballet and tap class at one of the School of Dance and Music studios in the South Bay. Students in the dance program in Rancho Palos Verdes and Redondo Beach range from 2 to 76.

Got to Dance

South Bay studio is in step with brainpower

By Joanna Lin
Staff Writer

When you have a degree in biology and your husband is an engineer, the natural business venture for you is a school of dance and music, right?

It is for Liliana Somma and Dan Galitzen. They own the School of Dance and Music, with two locations, in Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach.

“We are brainiacs, not just artists, and we try to instill that in the kids here — let them know you can dance and go to college. You can do both,” Somma said.

Serving more than 2,500 students each week, the School of Dance and Music has grown from a one-room studio in 1997 to the largest school of its kind in the South Bay.

With university-trained music teachers, modern facilities and dance classes capped at six to 12 students each, the school has a waiting list for both teachers and students.

BUSINESS WATCH

Name: School of Dance and Music

Locations: Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach

Year founded: 1997

Employees: 44

Revenue: increased by more than 20 percent from 2006 to 2007

Web site: www.schoolofdanceandmusic.com

Somma and Galitzen read extensively about innovations in the industry to find ideas to develop new classes, such as a piano preschool program that uses cartoon characters for key recognition.

Among the school's modern facilities are

“floating” dance floors that rest on high-density foam to absorb the shock of dance movement.

“Research, that’s the nerds in us,” Somma says.

More than just a business, the School of Dance and Music represents, for Somma and many of her students and teachers, an opportunity to “get away from what you have to do in life to what you want to do,” she said.

And what Somma has always wanted to do is dance. She started dancing at age 3.

But with strict parents who viewed dance as an activity only “for fun,” she found herself on a more academic path, studying biology at Loyola Marymount University and interning in medicine, physical therapy and dentistry.

But when not hitting the books, she was teaching dance lessons across Los Angeles.

In her freshman year in college, Somma started Lil’ Dancers, an afterschool dance pro-

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gram she hoped would bring in a few extra bucks and provide an outlet for her passion.

“You go into a dance studio, there’s just so much happiness and love,” said Somma, who felt out of place in the hospitals and laboratories biology students call home.

To promote her business, she bought a few newspaper ads and made a Lil’ Dancers brochure, thinking she could pick up five grade schools to hire her to teach their students.

She was surprised when more than 80 schools called, looking to Lil’ Dancers as a substitute for dwindling classroom arts programs.

To keep up with demand, Somma hired more than 40 dance teachers — most of them twice her age — and taught a handful of classes herself.

“I was working as well as managing, and that just doesn’t work,” she said.

After four years, she sold Lil’ Dancers to open a studio in Hermosa, right next to its current location, and 250 of her students followed.

She danced in her one-room studio for three years before maxing out many credit cards (all

quickly paid off) in order to expand into a neighboring gymnastics studio and closed Vietnamese restaurant.

With more space came more classes — in music.

Galitzen, Somma’s husband, left his engineering job to add music to her school.

An avid guitarist, Galitzen was playing with his band at Santa Monica Pier when Somma first spotted him years ago. Searching for an excuse to talk to him, Somma told him she could get his band a gig at the Manhattan Country Club, where she was teaching dance at the time.

The gig never happened, but the couple kept seeing each other, bonding over their love for the arts and envisioning their school.

Today, the couple manages their business and leaves the teaching to the school’s 38 dance and music teachers. But Somma still works with the company dancers nightly. And Galitzen brings his friends in for occasional jam sessions.

With students as young as 2 and as old as 76 in and out of the studios all day — in addition to their own 10-month-old son Mateo — Somma and Galitzen have their hands full. They’re in no hurry to grow the school, and Somma seems more than happy with the status quo: “I just want to love what I do.”

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