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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Dance/UP to Close Next Month

by Ellen Chenoweth

"Heartbreaking."

"Devastating."

"Shocking."

These were the kinds of words that came up in an informal poll of the Philadelphia dance community after the [news](#) hit on November 20 that Dance/UP had abruptly lost its major source of general operating support, the William Penn Foundation. Dance USA/Philadelphia (or Dance/UP), the remaining branch office of Dance/USA, is scheduled to cease operations as of December 31, 2014.

Dance/UP is a service organization for the local dance community and a service organization bears some resemblance to a union. It provides a spiritual home for a community, acting as a hub for information, resources and moral support. As a result of the sudden and unexpected loss of funding, the estimated 2000 dancers, choreographers, administrators, teachers and other workers who formed Dance/UP's constituency will lose their most visible and effective advocate.

Dance/UP, with the widely-respected Lois Welk at its helm for 7 years, was a particularly active and effective service organization, pursuing new programs with gusto and intelligence. There was the Dance in Public Places initiative, which facilitated dance companies rehearsing in storefront spaces at Market East, allowing casual shoppers the chance to view a dance-making process in action. There was the DancePass program, which gave members the chance to see performances at a discounted rate. There was an international artist-exchange program, a professional development scholarship, video editing software available to the community, a calendar highlighting local companies, a library, and an e-newsletter, and on and on— all programs developed and managed by the nimble Dance/UP staff. Even the staffing was explicitly designed to be of service to the constituency, with a practice of hiring professional dancers, providing them with stable and flexible part-time jobs that accommodated their performing careers.

Dance/UP was created in 2007 in response to a report put out by the William Penn Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts and as a result of a group of community leaders identifying the need for a centralized, non-curatorial service organization. Welk was chosen from a national search and has been Dance/UP's director since its inception. William Penn Foundation funding began in 2006, and had been renewed for three three-year cycles, with a fourth expected to be awarded at the end of October.

Staff leadership had been aware of the need for diversifying funds from the inception of the organization, and had been diligently working to build innovative partnerships that would add to the funding portrait of the organization. The search for resources was ongoing and had been fruitful, with support from foundations like the Knight and Barra Foundations, as well as grants from the city of Philadelphia, state funding from Pennsylvania, national funding through the National Endowment for the Arts, and others. But the William Penn Foundation grant still represented the vast majority of general operating support, covering expenses such as salaries, the lease of the office space and liability insurance.

The loss of funding came as a surprise to even those in the inner circle of Dance/USA and Dance/UP. The best-case scenario was to be funded at the full request amount, while the worst-case scenario was to be partially awarded. Instead, funding from the William Penn Foundation was zeroed out completely, leaving the organization with only a fraction of its operating budget for 2015. (Often if a foundation decides it will no longer be supporting an organization, it will let the leadership know years ahead of time, or there will be a gradual decline of support over a period of several years.) The Foundation's generous support had enabled the organization to emerge, initiate operations and thrive, and so the sudden pivot was all the more unexpected.

When asked to comment, the Foundation responded with a statement citing "an increasing demand for financial support" and "difficult decisions regarding where to invest its finite resources at any one time." The statement concluded that: "Dance/USA Philadelphia's closing is an unfortunate illustration of the challenges the sector continues to face and highlights the need to find solutions for a more sustainable arts community." It could be argued that these challenges include the lack of general operating support for arts organizations, and a tendency towards cyclical funding interests in the philanthropic community, with guidelines and priorities changing at a rapid clip.

After a press release announcing the organization's closing was posted online on last Thursday, word spread quickly via social media and among colleagues. A group of community members quickly assembled to draft a [petition](#) to fund a transition phase which would enable the organization some amount of closure and processing, rather than the abrupt shut-down currently looming. A phase-out would also enable the staff to search for new homes for the various programs. The [petition](#) is circulating until December 10 when the William Penn board will meet and discuss the possibility of transition funding.

As one petition signer, Keila Cordova, points out, "Transition funding is a small request. When you look at the greater loss to the community with the sudden dissolution of Dance/UP — unraveling the many innovative programs that Dance/UP has brought to the greater Philadelphia community, programs that have become models for other communities around the globe — transition funding is like giving cab fare for our Philly Cinderella whose chariot and white horses suddenly turned into a pumpkin and a handful of scampering mice." The comments on the petition give a hint of the immense community support for, and impact of, the organization.

The closing of Dance/UP is not just a massive blow to the Philadelphia dance community on a practical level as a result of the multitude of programs and services provided, but also on spiritual and psychological levels. Welk and her staff provided a sense of moral support for the dance community, a feeling that someone had its back. Even if the programmatic limbs of the organization find homes in other places, there is no central body, no singular beating heart to sustain the whole.

Choreographer Christina Gesualdi described the organization as a form of spiritual support. "In a community that experiences competition, scarcity, trauma and disparity in aesthetics, access to resources and value systems, Dance/UP is a physical symbol and actual hub where all dance artists and organizers in Philadelphia are invited to call or visit and to be vulnerable and express their

struggles, needs and curiosities. The personal approach provided by the employees and the incredibly generous and thoughtful Lois Welk make Dance/UP not just a place of action but a place of retreat...a refuge, a church, a commons, a shelter.” Wayne Hazzard, Executive Director of San Francisco’s dance service organization, expressed disappointment and concern: “If you don’t have a really strong support system within the [local dance] ecosystem, then things can die.”

Welk expressed gratitude to her colleagues in a written statement, “from the bottom of my heart, I am deeply grateful to my staff for their brilliant work, to this community for all of its support and to Dance/USA for launching one of the most effective dance service organizations in the country.” Dance/USA and Dance/UP will be co-hosting a series of community roundtables in the upcoming weeks to discuss what pieces feel most essential to preserve for the Dance/UP constituency and allow a space for collective processing.

What can be preserved of the legacy of Dance/UP remains to be determined by community response, organizing and action.

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