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THEATER WITHOUT WALLS

With an eye on the future, Segerstrom Center for the Arts is out to improve the community

by *Laura Bleiberg*

Natalia Nava was 10 years old when she got the news that her parents had tested positive for HIV. Within six months she started attending Kids Club, a special program at AIDS Services Foundation Orange County. It focuses on giving children coping skills, and it exposed her to information about HIV/AIDS and helped her plan toward higher education.

Kids Club also offers art classes through a partnership with Segerstrom Center for the Arts. On the surface, in light of everything Nava was going through, art classes might seem incidental or trivial. But they were crucial to her.

"The first year that Segerstrom came in they did puppetry, and I remember ... it completely, completely changed my life. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. The exposure to that type of art blew my mind away," says Nava, left, who is now 21 and oversees Kids Club as the foundation's Family Programs Coordinator.

"I felt like I could use artwork to express what I couldn't express with words."

The partnership with AIDS Services Foundation is just one of a new breed of programs Segerstrom Center runs, some of which are as much social service-related as they are geared toward the arts. In the past five years, the center has solidified or started partnerships with Alzheimer's Orange County, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, and CHOC. A dance and music class for children with disabilities, including cerebral palsy and Down syndrome, will start regular sessions in February.

These are not the art-education courses of old, and they represent a different role for Orange County's biggest and most prominent arts organization.

"We're in the next chapter of our existence, which is about how we can create value for our community," says Terry Dwyer, the center's president. "We want to be valuable: culturally, civically, and educationally."

THE MISSION OF THEATERS, orchestras, museums, and dance companies has long been to give us plays and

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Orange Coast

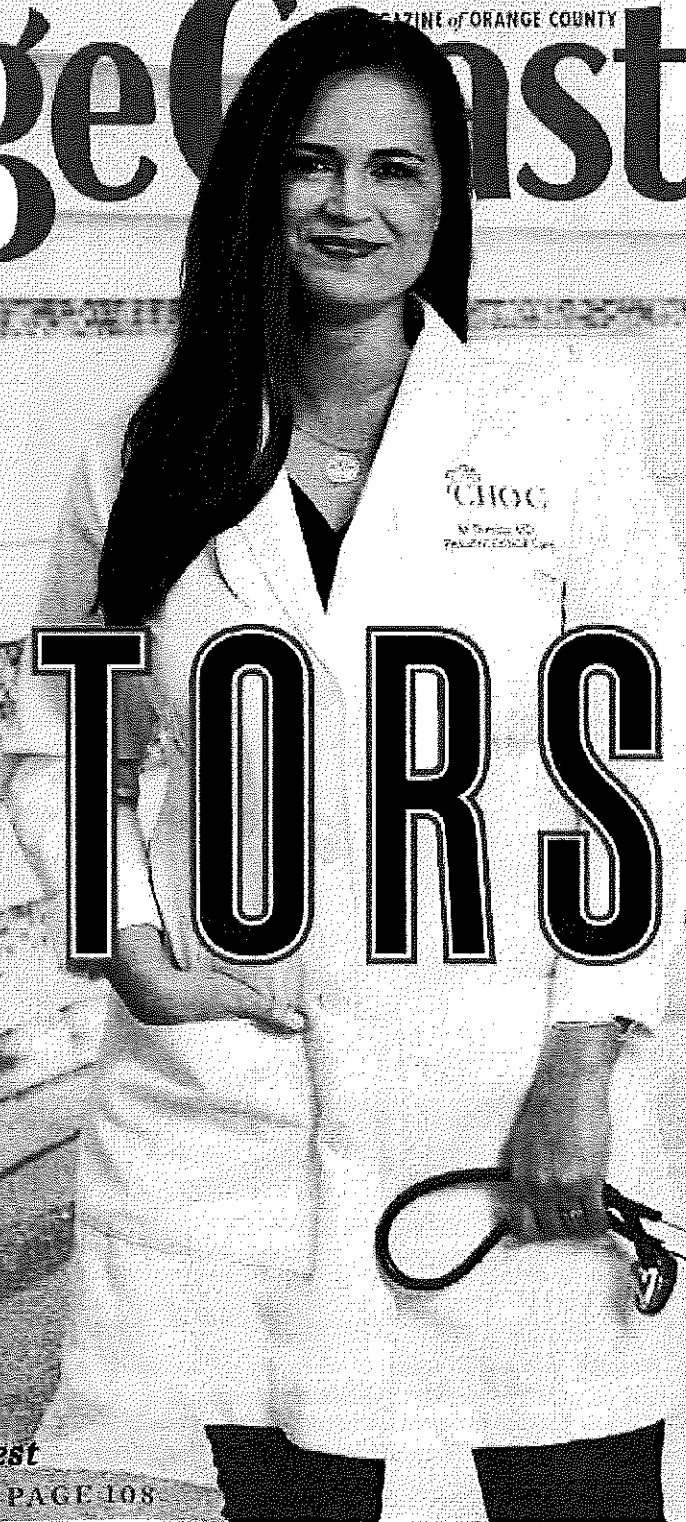
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arts-based community development of today ... is it's a more humble place for the arts to start from. We don't know what our role is in (a community) until we have a conversation with you about how your world can be better. Then we probably have something to offer. Integrating the arts into any challenge makes that challenge more surmountable."

When center officials reached out to suggest a partnership with Alzheimer's Orange County, they asked how they could provide assistance to the group's clients—men and women with dementia and their families and caregivers. Together, the two organizations decided to begin offering movement and music workshops in BrainDance, which is believed to have therapeutic effects and also provides socializing opportunities for participants. At a recent class in a large room at the group's Irvine headquarters, seven couples are swaying, sauntering, circling, and singing. These men and women—most

older than 60—smile and react enthusiastically to their earnest teacher. As the group dances into the middle of the room, the teacher cajoles, "We don't have to be like a school of fish, all going in the same direction." So some subtly shift their spacing, striding away from one another to fill the entire dance circle.

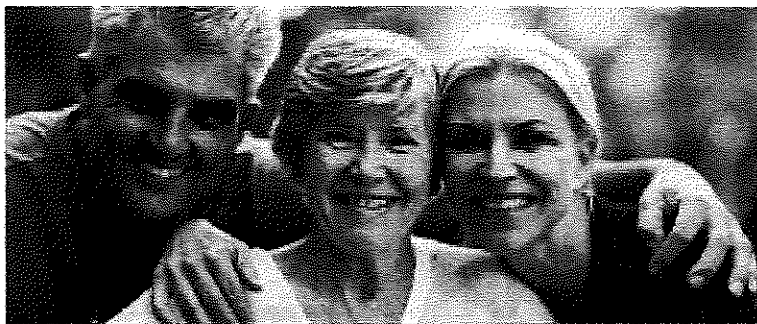
Kim Bailey, program and education specialist for Alzheimer's Orange County, is enthusiastic about the collaboration, saying she never imagined that Segerstrom Center had programs like this. "You could see from the expressions on our clients' faces how much the activity means to them," she says. "When you think about what it means to go to the theater ... this is not the picture you get in your mind."

ANOTHER PIECE OF THIS INITIATIVE is a physical makeover of the center's 12-acre campus on Town Center Drive, a long-talked-about and delayed \$14 million remodel of the Julianne and George Argy-

ros Plaza. Groundbreaking is now slated for mid-January on the 54,470-square-foot plaza, which was partially redone 10 years ago and has since been the site of free summer movie screenings, dance parties, and other events.

Center officials want to make what has been a largely hot, barren, and often breezy landscape into a comfortable place to hang out, with a picnic area under shade trees, benches, a cafe, free Wi-Fi, and two outdoor stages. New lighting and sound systems are planned. The current ambitious schedule calls for 30 weekends of free programming every year, including presentations by other local arts organizations. Officials hope to complete the plaza in late fall 2017.

Dwyer believes it will become nothing less than a "town square for all of Orange County. ... I really think we are in this reimagining of what it means to be a great performing arts center. I think we are creating a new model." ❧



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musicals, paintings and sculptures, symphonies, and ballets. Art in a communal setting was the primary purpose.

That is still first priority. But institutions across the country—large, small, and in between—started expanding their missions decades ago. Educational programs for children were a first and natural addition because children grow up to be the next generations of ticket buyers.

Now, says Dwyer, it's important to be involved in other kinds of activities, and not solely for the purpose of inspiring new audiences, as counterintuitive as that sounds.

"You know, we would like everybody to attend a show, but it doesn't matter if everybody doesn't," Dwyer explains. "We want to be relevant in their lives also. That's in part why this whole range of programs has evolved."

Some take place online. In August, center officials invited John Crawford, UC Irvine associate professor of dance and media arts, to collaborate with dancers from Russia's Mariinsky Theatre, who were at the center to perform in "Tour de Force III." Crawford attended a rehearsal with the dancers, introducing them to an interactive digital media system he invented. The center streamed the creative back-and-forth live on Facebook, attracting nearly 11,000 viewers to this artistic encounter, Dwyer says this, too, is part of the center's new mission.

"I think there will be a (center) constituency that's entirely based in social media," he says. "Our attendance needs to grow, but it needs to grow in paid and unpaid (events)."

THIS IDEA OF ARTS GROUPS BRINGING "value added" experiences to their communities is bubbling up in cities across the country, says Clay Lord, a vice president with Americans for the Arts, a Washington D.C.-based advocacy nonprofit. The theory is that the arts can help to improve any community—but arts administrators first have to reach out, rather than expecting residents to come to them.

"The idea that art happens inside these hallowed halls doesn't really work for everyone," Lord says. "What's great about