

Remarks by Linda Luca May 18, 2018

As a dancer who loved performing on stage, a teacher whose heart would burst with pride as my dancers took to the stage, you'd think I'd be thrilled to speak today - but the thought of speaking has actually terrified me for weeks. Not only is speaking not my forte, but I shouldn't be up here alone receiving this award. When I first came to PEA, I didn't know where the dance program should be headed or how to get there. My insecurities, though, seem to have had a positive outcome - to seek help and to surround myself with amazing people.

So, today, I am here to accept this award on behalf of the students, faculty, staff, administration, trustees, my family and friends upon whose shoulders the dance program was built. Thank you on their behalf and thank you to them.

Hundreds of dancers were and are truly the heart of the program.

How fortunate that the dance program has been able to straddle two departments:

--The Physical Education Department gave the dance program a home, not only physically, but programmatically. Mr. Seabrooke; then Ms. Nekton, creative problem solver extraordinaire, and Mr. Barbin and Mr. Hudson as department heads, urged us on, along with the supporting cast of PE faculty and staff who were always encouraging, sometimes scraping me up off the floor.

--The connection with the Theater and Dance Department started the first week that I arrived in 1972 when I choreographed *West Side Story* for the grand opening of Fisher Theater. As a student, Ms. Ream was cast as Anybody's. For the next 40 years, the dance program and I benefited from her sage advice and collaboration. I choreographed many shows Mr. Richards directed, as he navigated a partnership with dance, transitioning the drama department to be the Theater and Dance department. We were no longer interlopers begging for a place to perform. Mr. Wendell, a consummate outside-of-the-box thinker, made each show happen. He didn't even roll his eyes when I decided that for *Moulin Rouge* we needed a swing to hang from the stage rafters that would swing out over the audience; he made two. Student techies like brothers Jacob and Aaron, who teched eight years of dance, deserve a shout out.

The always-reliable academy staff creatively solved problems: what's a studio without ballet barres? No problem! The wooden barres you are still using were built 45 years ago by our carpenters. Ms. Dagostino and Mr. Bruno made dance assemblies happen. Without today's technology, we made recordings with a record player, a microphone and reel-to-reel tapes in a soundproof room. The IT Staff sometimes missed lunch to tweak publicity or stayed after hours to print programs.

Academy families became our faithful audience.

Administration and trustees made a commitment to the arts.

My husband, Dave, multitasked three jobs and still managed to pick up three preschoolers from the sitter every time it was tech week. Friends graciously picked up the slack. Our three children are successful adults in spite of a mother going in a million directions at once.

So, how cool is it that I get all the credit!

A concern that I had for years is that this dance program with its inclusive opportunities would fade into oblivion for lack of appropriate studio facilities. In 1972, we started in a closet next to the TAD Jones room, moved five years later to a section of the basement of the old gym where the fitness center is now. That much space seemed like paradise even though it had four huge poles in the middle. Then

with the help of the Bodas family, we moved to the glorious Davis Studio, always knowing that it was a temporary home. But I can breathe easily now; the fourth dance home is on the horizon. The new Goel Center for Theater and Dance exemplifies the academy's commitment to the arts, affirming their educational value for the performer, the creator and the audience.

Of course, the road has not always been smooth. I spent an entire concert in the wings holding an umbrella over a lighting tree because the Fisher Theater roof was leaking. Even I knew that electricity and water shouldn't be dancing together. A rehearsal was interrupted for a trip to the emergency room when Curtis missed Bre on that Dirty Dancing lift - you know that lift - the one that has been immortalized in the best super bowl ad ever with Eli Manning and Odell Beckham Jr. Google it! Of course, there were days when I thought I couldn't keep the program moving forward - rehearsals fell apart, sound systems broke down in the middle of shows.

I have to admit I checked out previous Founder's Day speeches. That made me even more panicked. They had a message, they had advice - what could my message be and who am I to give advice? I love the sayings, now called "memes" - but I like the word "precept". I bet many of you read Palacio's book, *Wonder*. Maybe I could just not talk and do a slide show of my favorite precepts, which I sometimes use as mantras. One that I use often "Keep your head down, and keep moving" probably encourages shortsightedness, but has been very helpful in moments of panic. If I encouraged you to "Fluff out your tutu and walk away", that probably would not be good advice, either. I do believe in seeing things through to the end. But my all-time favorite is by Maya Angelou, "People will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel".

I needed to find a message to give you today. Several people suggested that I share my vision, but oh, no, I HAD no vision when I first arrived. I finally realized that that's my message - no vision! In 1972, I needed a job! P.E. Department head, Mr. Seabrooke, needed a P.E. activity to offer girls because coeducation had arrived.

Maybe there's an upside to having no vision, and a secondary characteristic. Not thinking you have all the answers makes one open to the ideas of others. So, this is how this dance program, PEA specific, evolved, not in spite of, but maybe because of my lack of confidence and lack of vision. It evolved according to the needs and interests of PEA dancers. Harkness was brought into the dance studio by the dancers. I don't think it entered their minds not to be active participants. My 'no vision' left me with an open mind for ideas. I welcomed and needed the students' participation. I quickly realized that students, whether beginners or previously trained, had much to offer. Dancers volunteered their insight as to how they approached pirouettes. Dancers choreographed, giving other dancers in their pieces new perspectives. Their ideas were always better than mine. Ellie (Ms. Morris's daughter) had already borrowed goggles and equipment from the science department when she told me her piece was about atoms and molecules. Lixian had camouflaged-costumed nuns. Cait did a ballet based on the board game Clue.

This Harkness thing proved to be a win-win! The program was growing.

The dancers were on a roll. Power is an addiction, especially for Exonians, I noticed.... Carmen said one day, "Why can't we perform for Family Weekend?" Then her family got involved, which resulted in the Stewart Dance Prize. Then we started field trips when someone piped up, "Let's go see Alvin Ailey in Boston!" Camille said, "Why can't we have a dance company and dance concert every term?" Then the dancers proceeded to do the heavy lifting to make those things happen. They hauled costumes to Fisher, spent lunch putting down the marley dance floor (of course, Mr. Wendell had to order out pizza). They designed and put up the publicity, ran rehearsal warmups. Then, of course, they wanted recognition for all this, thus the advent of dance captains. After all, a dance company bears a striking resemblance to sports teams with its advantages and responsibilities.

Keya and Marlo decided we needed dance clubs, so they made that happen. Now there are 16. Clubs started performing in the spring concert. When we ran out of room in the show, we had to start a dance assembly. Necessity is the mother of invention - oops, another precept. Michaela had my back for 12 terms. As far as I'm aware, she is the only student to take dance all 12 terms of her Exeter career.

From the beginning, the foundation of the program has been ballet and modern dance. Dancers arrived with many interests beyond those two techniques. Thus were born semi-private classes, which addressed interest in other techniques and cultures, such as Flamenco and Middle Eastern Dance, taught by Ms. Melone.

Exeter dance continued to grow. My aim to expose my dancers to the dance world beyond me gave advent to master classes, residencies and guest choreographers. I studied and performed African Dance in college and wanted my dancers to be exposed to this amazing dance technique and culture. This dovetailed beautifully with Mr. Armstrong's growing West African Drumming program. Professional choreographers were and are brought in, most notably Myra Jones Romain '74, one of my very first dancers, who built that aspect of the dance program with Mr. Armstrong.

Several students did field courses in dance. Priscilla and Lisa taught dance to faculty children. Rebecca studied dance history.

Then the dancers wanted to add *non-sibi*. "We're going to make blankets for children in the homeless shelter after rehearsal. Can we use the studio and will you order pizza for us?" Ok! Mr. Harold Brown '74, (who, by the way, married another one my very first PEA dancers, Vivian) organized a Katrina relief trip. Ashanti, one of the first guys to be trained in our dance program went to New Orleans with us where my husband taught him to do sheetrock repair. Ann and Ellie returned as guest choreographers after they graduated starting a tradition of giving back to the program. Mr. Hassan, always an ardent supporter of the dance program, and Ms. Herney were instrumental in connecting potential Exonians with the dance program.

I learned an important lesson from Ms. Girard. I erroneously thought that a dance background was needed to choreograph. I learned from her and from my beginning dancers that having something to say is the only prerequisite. Her piece was wonderful; ask her about it. Mr. Weatherspoon asked for help with choreography for Faculty Follies. You see, academia was not Mr. Weatherspoon's first career choice. He really wanted to be one of the Temptations. Just ask him to show you 'My Girl'! And the adult most influential and important to the dance program has been Mrs. Parris, who as jill of all trades (assistant to me, backstage techie, costume mistress to name a few of the hats she wore) held not only our costumes together but our sanity.

I was incredibly grateful to be able to pass the program into the capable hands of Ms. Duke. She is an excellent teacher, even more important, an exceptional person, who shares my philosophy that dance should be an inclusive art form. I suspected from first seeing her teach that she should take the reins. One day made it crystal clear. Ms. Duke came on crutches right from the emergency room to the dance studio to teach class, just propped her leg up on a stool and proceeded to teach class - an excellent class as I remember. Gosh, another precept "Show up, no excuses, and do the very best you can". The dance faculty roster is very fortunate to include Ms. Darling and Ms. Duclos, magnificent teachers and colleagues - definitely frosting on the cake.

So, that's my message: Keep an open mind, surround yourself with good people and don't worry about starting with a vision- it will evolve.

Thank you for this honor and especially for letting me play in your sandbox.