

Linda Luca — For 40 years, your humor, warmth and love for teaching and dance graced the Academy community. Hired in 1972 as a part-time dance instructor with the Physical Education Department, over the next four decades you poured your heart and soul into building a thriving dance program that now boasts 16 extracurricular dance clubs, an advanced-level dance company and four levels of instruction. As the program expanded, you collaborated with members of Exeter’s drama program, and in 2006 helped establish the Department of Theater and Dance. With extraordinary generosity, enthusiasm and goodwill, you helped elevate the performing arts at Exeter and introduced generations of students to the joys of movement and creative expression.

Nurturing a love of dance from an early age, you spent summers with the National Ballet in Canada and Washington, D.C., and, against the advice of your guidance counselor, declared yourself a dance major when applying to colleges. Your reason was simple: “I knew doing something I loved would make me happy to greet each new day.” Following graduation from Adelphi University, you pursued American Dance Festival courses at Connecticut College and performed in summer stock musicals with the Rochester Music Theater. As a member of the New Haven Ballet Company, you taught outreach classes and discovered a passion for teaching. In 1972, you jumped at an invitation from then-Director of Athletics Ted Seabrooke to teach dance to Exeter’s newly arrived female students. Little could anyone have anticipated what a mark you would leave on the Academy — or the boundless energy and imagination with which you would set about building a comprehensive dance program, “one student, one class, one day, one performance at a time.”

Many have said you built that program single-handedly, but you would insist on giving credit to your students. Indeed, it was the energy you created together that breathed life into a burgeoning program. You embraced your dancers’ ideas, adapting the curriculum to meet their needs and interests. While other schools built traditional programs focused on classical ballet and skilled ballerinas, you welcomed dancers of all genders, abilities and experience levels and sought to include expressive dance forms in a variety of genres. Balancing your teaching with performances in the New England Dance Theater, you brought in guest instructors to teach Indian and West African dance; worked to honor the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. through dance; served as the de facto adviser to numerous student-led dance clubs; and allowed your students the creative freedom to choreograph their own performances — a rare gift in the world of dance education.

Though you insisted your students practice correct technique, you cared as much about developing their love for the art form as you did about honing their talents. You believed anyone with an interest in dance deserved the opportunity to take part in the program — whether enrolling in classes for credit, participating in student-led dance clubs or delighting in performances as members of the audience. Shepherding young people through the perils of adolescence and concerns over body image, you instilled the confidence and exhilaration to be found in dance, regardless of body type. In honor of your exceptional teaching, in 2000 you were awarded the Rupert Radford ’56 Faculty Fellowship. Upon your retirement 12 years later, students described how — “all smiles and eyes” — you had influenced them. “I never heard words of doubt from her,” wrote one. “Your studio was a refuge for me,” wrote another. “I felt relaxed, beautiful and free to be myself.”

It's hard to reconcile the performing arts program of today with its humble beginnings. Initially, you were paid out of a petty cash fund and held performances wherever you could find space. For years, your dancers moved deftly and not without some risk around support beams that ran from floor to ceiling in the basement of the old Thompson Gym. Through it all, you adapted with ingenuity and good humor, partnering with members of the drama program to stage shows in Fisher Theater. "It was Linda's inspiration and deep understanding of goodness and collaboration that helped redefine the Drama Department as the Department of Theater and Dance," recounts a longtime colleague and friend. When the newly converted Davis Dance Studio opened in 2010 just two years before you retired, you rejoiced at the opportunity it would provide your dancers. And then, you went to work, choreographing your next moves and mentoring your replacement to ensure a smooth transition and the continuation of a rich and rewarding program.

As we anticipate the opening of the new David E. and Stacey L. Goel Center for Theater and Dance — heralding the next phase of the performing arts at Exeter — we are grateful for the indelible imprint you left on the Academy. Linda, in honor of your joyful heart and innovative spirit, and in commemoration of your efforts to enhance the arts and expand the Exeter experience, it is our great pleasure and privilege to present to you the 2018 Founder's Day Award.