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**Pacific Northwest Ballet's Franca Russell Center: A Case Study**

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Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities

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### **Abstract**

In the fall of 2001, Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) School's Eastside location was bursting at the seams. PNB leadership had been looking for a new location to accommodate growing enrollment, but the right location proved difficult to find and the company was in the midst of a huge capital campaign to build Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at Seattle Center. Yet when a former Gold's Gym suddenly became available, PNB School leapt at the opportunity, taking on the challenge to simultaneously raise \$5.5 million dollars and build a new state-of-the-art dance school, eventually named the Francina Russell Center (FRC), to serve the Eastside community. They overcame significant challenges to build a school that met both their own needs and those of the community, in just one year. A story emerges of Kent Stowell and Francina Russell's singular vision to provide the same excellence in dance education to the Eastside that existed in Seattle. This vision, supported by a strong board, experienced staff leadership, and a demographic market ripe for expansion, was key to the project's success.

### **Pacific Northwest Ballet's Franca Russell Center: A Case Study**

On an unassuming street in a suburban commercial park, just off busy Bel-Red road in Bellevue, Washington, sits a large beige warehouse with black trim. One subtle sign for Pacific Northwest Ballet School, and a series of enticing banners above the entrance are a visitor's only clues to the extraordinary facility within. Open the door and a different view emerges: high ceilings, natural wood, and warm colors on the walls; a comfortable waiting area and modern lounge; a long, inviting hallway with five large dance studios. The Franca Russell Center was designed to inspire.

Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) School's Franca Russell Center provides an Eastside presence for the renowned ballet company and its prestigious school. Its opening in 2002 made PNB "the first major local arts institution to have significant facilities both in Seattle and on the Eastside (Beers, 2002)." In the past twelve years this facility has earned its reputation for excellence in dance instruction, due in large part to the singular vision of PNB Founding Artistic Directors Kent Stowell and Franca Russell. As Russell described in a 2002 press release, this facility allowed her to "build the school I would have wanted for myself as a student – based on a solid classical foundation and offering multiple dance forms and a professional, nurturing environment."

This vision, bolstered by strong leadership and trusted partnerships, resulted in a facility that reflects PNB's vision of epitomizing excellence. Most importantly, this facility serves the mission of PNB, "To set new standards for artistic excellence, innovation and creativity; attract the most talented dancers, choreographers, musicians, collaborative artists, staff and volunteers; educate and develop dance artists as well as enthusiasts; captivate a devoted, supportive, continually growing, and diverse audience; and strengthen our financial and organizational

foundation.” Opening its doors after a brief 12-month capital campaign and concurrent building renovation, the Francia Russell Center has since nearly tripled PNB School’s enrollment on the Eastside and is now widely considered one of Bellevue’s crown jewels with regard to arts institutions. How did this facility, now so crucial to both PNB and the Eastside community, go from a vision to reality in just one year?

### **Background and History**

PNB School first expanded to the Eastside in 1986, opening two studios at 124<sup>th</sup> Plaza, a Bellevue business mall. School Administrator Denise Bolstad recalled the school consisting of those two studios, a small lobby and office outfitted with donated furniture, dressing rooms and restrooms for students and staff, and “a little four-foot table that someone donated for the coffee pot” (personal communication, October 22, 2014).

Despite these humble-sounding accommodations, PNB School’s reputation had preceded it and the Eastside location was enrolled at full capacity almost as soon as it opened. Yet even as the new school became settled in the community, it became clear that the building it had leased was far from ideal: a print shop below leached ink fumes into the School’s space, causing health problems for one employee that resulted in months of air quality testing and attempted solutions to resolve the issue. Questions were frequently raised as to whether or not classes should be cancelled due to the strong odor. As Bolstad recalled, “It was every day for what seemed like several years” (personal communication, October 22, 2014).

The search for a new site continued off and on over the next 15 years, as finding a suitable space proved no simple task. There were several factors to consider in building a new school, primarily the need for large, open spaces to house multiple studios. Russell and Stowell were also committed to building a space that bore the same footprint as the Phelps Center in

Seattle: a similar layout including their “Main Street” concept, which Bolstad describes as “a main hallway where anyone and everyone – board members, people who were interested in ballet, parents – would walk down the hallway and see dance everywhere they looked, and the admin offices in proximity to the studios, so they would hear the music. You always knew why you were there” (personal communication, October 22, 2014).

During this time, Eastside demographics continued to shift in ways that would support a school expansion. Between 1990 and 2000 Bellevue’s population alone had expanded by 26.1 percent, from 86,874 in 1990 to nearly 110,000 by 2000. Nearby Redmond experienced a similar increase of 26.4 percent, Kirkland increased by 12.4 percent and outlying Issaquah increased by a whopping 44 percent (King County, 2003). With this population increase came an increase in families who PNB anticipated would take an interest in ballet classes. Most of all, Russell and Stowell wanted to demonstrate PNB’s commitment to its Eastside patrons and students. Bolstad confirmed this, stating, “Kent and Francina were very committed that it remain *Pacific Northwest Ballet*; that it was the Pacific Northwest, and that we should be as committed to the Eastside as we were to Seattle. They felt strongly that Seattle and Bellevue were the same” (personal communication, October 22, 2014).

In the midst of this long search process, PNB acquired a new board member who would prove to be not only one of the company’s most involved patrons but the leading force behind the Francina Russell Center project. PNB Trustee Peter Horvitz moved to Bellevue in 1994 after purchasing Journal American newspaper, which later became the King County Journal. As he described in an interview, “My predecessor [the previous publisher of Journal American] had been on the board of PNB, so I was asked soon after I arrived to join the board. I didn’t know anybody in Seattle or the area, and I thought it would be an interesting thing to do. And because

of my role on the Eastside [as publisher of the local newspaper], I had a particular interest in the Eastside School” (personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Horvitz’ infusion of support for a new Eastside School was amplified with the arrival of Executive Director D. David Brown in 2000. Brown came to PNB from Boston Ballet, having overseen a \$10 million capital project for that company in 1990-91 (Boston Ballet, n.d.). Brown saw almost immediately upon his arrival that the Eastside School either needed to expand or close. It was clear to him that the space limitations and ensuing enrollment cap were negatively affecting revenues (D. Brown, personal communication, November 19, 2014). Given that the Eastside School had been operating at full capacity nearly since the day it opened its doors, and taking into account area demographics, it seemed likely that the community would support a larger school. Expansion therefore seemed like the best strategy for improving the PNB School’s bottom line while affirming PNB’s commitment to the Eastside, but first this strategy had to be communicated to the PNB board.

One obstacle to expansion was a growing concern from some board trustees that it was no longer financially viable to maintain a presence on the Eastside. Particularly after 2000’s tech bubble burst and ensuing economic downturn, there was consensus that the school could no longer be supported by the company but would have to pay its own way and contribute to the bottom line. PNB Trustee Emeritus (who served as School Committee Chair at the time of this project) Jane McConnell explained, “The school was seen as taking money from the company; we had to educate the board that the [revenue] numbers could show improvement” (personal communication, November 19, 2014).

Brown and McConnell, with input from the School Committee, got to work building a case for support to present to the board. Beyond the obvious potential for revenue expansion, this

case focused on the ways in which PNB School supported the mission of PNB. In particular, the case emphasized that a new facility would increase access to high quality dance education and training for Eastside residents, offer the company and school a broader selection of talented students, create broader visibility for PNB in the region, expand PNB and PNB School's base of fundraising support, and lay a greater foundation for audience development.

### **Perfect Opportunity, Imperfect Timing**

In the fall of 2001, Horvitz noticed an old Gold's Gym near the King County Journal offices that was for lease, with what he described as "perfect open space design" (personal communication, November 14, 2014). Approximately one mile east of the Eastside School location, the former gym offered over 24,000 square feet ready for renovation and customization, a nearly fivefold increase in space. The building's high ceilings, large volume of unobstructed space, and existing locker rooms made it ideal for a dance training facility. But with a multi-million-dollar capital campaign for McCaw Hall in full swing and many PNB donors contributing significantly to that project, the timing seemed unfavorable to raise funds for a new facility. According to Horvitz,

We realized from a timing perspective it might not have been perfect, but if we were going to do it, we now had a location and we needed to [act]. So the board made the commitment, and we needed to then raise the money. (personal communication, November 14, 2014)

After negotiating favorable rent terms and determining the project budget, \$5.5 million was set as the goal: \$3.5 million for the facility and \$2 million for a school endowment. Horvitz agreed to take on the role of Capital Campaign Chair and signaled his commitment to the project with a significant financial contribution that secured the naming rights to the facility. Due in



large part to Horvitz' example and enthusiasm, other board members were inspired to support the project. McConnell recalled one memorable cocktail party fundraiser that secured a number of pledges. "As the sun set in the background, an announcement was made: 'We would like to call it the Francia Russell Center.' And that was it – we had a cause" (personal communication November 19, 2014). Horvitz echoed this sentiment. "For Francia, it really was her school. She wrote the syllabus, she created it; the school deserved her name as it does today" (personal communication, November 14, 2014).

By all accounts, from that point on, raising the money was easy. Horvitz described it as a "PNB friends and family" campaign rather than a full phase capital campaign. Nearly all funds were raised through internal donations from the board and a parents' giving campaign. Naming opportunities for everything from the Patricia Barker Library to individual lockers provided a myriad of ways for supporters to donate at their preferred level. PNB also applied for and was granted up to \$268,000 in Washington State funding from Building for the Arts, and took out a bank loan to cover expenses until campaign pledges came in (Perry, 2002).

Horvitz and McConnell continued to build support within the Bellevue and King County community, attending Bellevue City Council meetings, inviting King County and Eastside government officials to tour the facility, and reaching out to Eastside city council members, mayors, and community leaders through open houses and meetings. As a result of this outreach, some community leaders were persuaded to donate to the campaign. However, even with a wide base of support, the campaign took several years to complete, due mainly to a number of multi-year pledges. The campaign finally concluded in 2006.

### **Renovations and Revenue**

The Francia Russell Center campaign was unusual in that the facility was being

renovated as the money was raised; as a result, everything happened on a compressed timeline. Working in PNB's favor were the organization's existing relationships with local architect Gordon Walker and contractor Sellen Construction, with whom Russell and Stowell had worked to build the Phelps Center in Seattle. Bolstad also had fond memories of working with Walker, explaining that "he was already up to speed, knowing what Kent and Francia's vision was, what were their likes and dislikes. They were on the same page aesthetically" (personal communication, October 22, 2014). Meetings were held weekly with a small team of planners, builders, and administrators to track progress and ensure that the project stayed within its budget. In the end, the total cost to build the Francia Russell Center came to \$3.2 million. Capital Campaign Chair Horvitz lifted restrictions on the remaining \$300,000 to assist with transitional costs.

The Francia Russell Center opened October 28, 2002 with a small afternoon celebration. Local media came out to document the first classes (Perry, 2002) and PNB's marketing department created a series of flyers, direct mail brochures, and media ads exhorting parents to enroll their children for ballet classes with the message, "Give your child the best." This call to action was backed by PNB School's reputation for excellence and the legacy of Francia Russell, who emphasized, "To my knowledge, there has never been a great ballet company without a great school."

The school wasn't immediately profitable, but did run a significantly smaller deficit, which was seen as an improvement, and within three years began to show an annual net revenue surplus. Some changes were necessary to meet both community needs and revenue goals. To respond to a growing trend for "Mommy and Me" classes and bolster its bottom line, the Francia Russell Center began to add classes for early childhood dance education. Bolstad explained,

“There was some concern about enrollment. We added Tots (age 4) and Duets (Mommy & Me) which we don’t have [at Phelps Center]. It was kind of out of our comfort zone, but we felt as long as we kept the professionalism and the criteria [the same] as we do for the rest of the school – have professional teachers, live accompaniment, that kind of thing – that we could embark on this and feel okay about it” (personal communication October 22, 2014). Taking that risk ultimately paid off; in 2014 over half of the 300 students at the Francia Russell Center were enrolled in these two programs, and total enrollment exceeds that of the Phelps Center.

### **Epilogue**

Prior to expansion, enrollment at PNB’s Eastside School had reached its maximum capacity at 241 students; within a year of opening, the Francia Russell Center had 325 students and was continuing to grow. Twelve years later, PNB School serves 587 students representing 34 cities in three Washington State counties, truly putting the “Pacific Northwest” in Pacific Northwest Ballet. PNB School no longer relies on the company for subsidy but instead plays a crucial role in supporting company operations. In particular, the Francia Russell Center has achieved a net revenue surplus in all but two of its twelve years. According to Horvitz, “We knew that there would be growth potential. I think it’s fair to say that it’s been more successful than we ever thought” (personal communication, November 14, 2014). Bolstad concurred, highlighting the vision of Russell and Stowell that started it all. “I think they felt that, ‘if we build it they will come.’ And that’s kind of what happened” (personal communication, October 22, 2014).

In 2016, Sound Transit, the tri-county regional transit authority condemned the site of the Francia Russell Center to accommodate the route of the new Eastlink Light Rail line. PNB had to quickly respond in order to maintain an Eastside presence, and then plan for an unanticipated

capital project. Though four times the cost of the original FRC, in another rolling 12-month campaign, PNB funded and constructed a new school right next door to the former location (Pacific Northwest Ballet, 2016). The new Francia Russell Center opened in September, 2017 (Ringman, 2017).

**Method Note:**

This case study was developed by Kristen R. Liang, MFA 2015 for Seattle University's MFA in Arts Leadership course Cultural Infrastructure and Facilities taught by faculty Katie Oman and Bill Moskin. Interviews were conducted with former PNB Executive Director D. David Brown; PNB School Administrator Denise Bolstad; FRC Capital Campaign Chair Peter Horvitz; and PNB Board Trustee Emeritus Jane McConnell; as part of this research during Fall Quarter, 20194. Updated in 2020 by Susan Kunimatsu. Citations and References may not conform to APA standards.

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