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Wind: WNW at 11 mph
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Photo

by Marty Sohl

The Nguyen dancers: Danny Nguyen and Casey May at Mills College Dance Studio

Dance Alum to Keep College of Alameda on Its Toes

By Johyné Taylor Hill

The College of Alameda recently hired acclaimed choreographer Danny Nguyen to revamp the school's dance program. For Nguyen, who is a College of Alameda (COA) alumnus, it's all about giving back.

Nguyen lived in Saigon, Vietnam, until 1983 at the age of

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19, but he didn't think about becoming a dancer until he arrived at a U.S. airport.

"I saw a commercial in the Hawaii airport for a cruise ship, and I got inspired by the dancers. I thought, 'Wow, I think I can do that,'" Nguyen said. "I came from a very poor family, so I never thought of it when I was in Saigon."

Nguyen says his dancing is very American, but Vietnamese culture is often evident in his props, costumes and music.

After arriving in the United States, Nguyen moved to Alameda and took an ESL class at the college.

He also decided to try ballet and choreography as his first dance classes. Nguyen found that he was a natural dancer.

"When I first started ballet class, the teacher thought I had been dancing for a long time. It wasn't hard," he said. "Also, choreography is something in my blood; I come up with it easily."

"I also was inspired by a friend and dancer, Gerri Wills. But I wasn't going for dance as a career. I thought, 'I'd never make any money, and my parents would kill me.' But I couldn't be a doctor. I'm very physical."

Nguyen's talent was recognized by one of his teachers, former COA professor David Blood. Blood offered to give Nguyen free private coaching, and he encouraged Nguyen to pursue dance as a career.

From this foundation, Nguyen went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the California Institute of the Arts and a Master of Fine Arts in dance from Mills College. In 1999, he was recognized by renowned choreographer Paul Taylor as one of the seven best creative choreographers in the Bay Area.

Nguyen also formed his own troupe, the Nguyen Dance Company, and taught dance at Laney College, where he formed the Laney College Repertory Dance Company.

Nguyen's teaching philosophy is one of inclusion, and he is bringing this to his dance classes at the college.

"Students need to be encouraged. You can't say you're too old, too young, too fat or too skinny. Dance is for everybody," Nguyen said. "Modern dance comes from inside. Anyone who wants to dance is encouraged to come and take these classes and see for themselves that they can dance."

"I've had a lot of beginning students who've never danced, and after one summer, they perform a 10-minute dance I choreograph for them. I tell them, 'I wouldn't make myself or you look bad on stage. If you

look bad dancing my choreography, we both look bad. I make sure we'll both look good on stage.' This makes them feel very comfortable. You have to make them feel comfortable with their body and their age."

Nguyen wants to bring dance back to COA the way it was when he was a student. Currently, the dance classes offered are just in social dance.

Faculty members who taught Nguyen are no longer teaching at COA, and current professors and faculty are unsure why the dance program was closed.

Nguyen has a plan to get students on their toes again, and he'll start this fall with basic ballet, modern technique, yoga and Pilates.

He will also teach ballroom and yoga at offsite locations.

Later, he will add classes such as dance history and choreography.

In the spring, Nguyen plans to add a dance competition and possibly other productions.

His goal is to create a concert every semester to give students opportunities to perform.

He has received approval from the college to invite international students to bring talent and increased funding to the dance program, and he plans to create course outlines that will prepare students to pursue professional dancing.

He wants to emphasize, however, that the classes are basic and foundational, and that dancing is a great way to communicate and find one's inner dancer's body.

"I really want to create a program here," Nguyen said. "I'm an alum, and I want to give back to the students."

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