

## Dancer's devotion has shaped PYB into a top regional company

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By Jane Vranish, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette  
Jean Gedeon was alone one night, tending to mundane details at her Pittsburgh Youth Ballet studios -- sweeping, moving furniture, cleaning -- when she noticed a man outside the window. She glanced at the clock, surprised to see that it was 5 a.m. The man outside was a parent, anxious to be first in line to purchase tickets for the company's annual "Nutcracker" production.

She invited him in for coffee and started another day.

Time means nothing to Gedeon, and ballet means everything. As artistic director, she presides over 450 students and 18 staff members like a fairy godmother who, with just a wave of her wand, gets parents to line up and sew costumes, man the phones, construct dance floors, raise funds and purchase those tickets.

But the payoff is very rich. The Youth Ballet is regarded as one of the top regional companies in the country, one that provides a never-ending stream of dancers to professional groups like the San Francisco, Louisville, San Jose and Austin ballet companies. And Gedeon is reaping the rewards of a lifetime devoted to ballet. Most recently, she was acknowledged by Chautauqua Ballet Institute and Dance Teacher Magazine for her efforts.

The School of American Ballet, associated with New York City Ballet, also honored her as one of three top teachers in the United States. Gedeon currently has four former students in the company: soloist Stephen Hanna and corps members Faye Arthurs, Lindy Mandradjieff and Stephanie Zungre. Jeffrey Edwards, former NYCB soloist and current associate director of Washington Ballet, still calls her every week.



**For 20 years Jean Gedeon has worked with young ballet dancers such as Kathryn Miller, shown in a photo taken by Archie Carpenter.**  
Click photo for larger image.

"Jean gives her students the opportunity to develop in ballets that other studios don't. She goes that extra mile," says PYB associate director Melissa Allen Bowman.

And it never ends. The latest crop from PYB, 26 strong and lithe dancers, will all attend the top ballet schools this summer -- either the School of American Ballet or American Ballet Theatre School. Six of Gedeon's youngest were chosen to perform with the New York City Ballet at Saratoga Springs, where other schools are lucky to get one participant.



Robin Rombach, Post-Gazette

**In Bethel Park, the Pittsburgh Youth Ballet will have a studio with 24,000 square feet of space. Among those who will use it are, from left front, Kristen Svrcek, Amy Barker, Anjali Malhotra; back, Kelsey Foss and Holland Banse.**

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

It all seems picture-perfect, this school where nary a pimple is in sight on radiant budding ballerinas, where there is a waiting list for beginning classes, where Gedeon is celebrating 20 years of excellence with two grand performances at the Byham Theater this weekend.

But, of course, it isn't perfect. Excellence comes with a price, and Gedeon's critics point to unbalanced budgets and organizational control as sources of ongoing friction with her executive board.

This battle of pointe shoes and point of view is one reason Gedeon is both guardian angel and

on guard.

## A family affair

Gedeon established herself as a soloist at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre during its formative years. But when she broke her foot, she turned to another love, teaching, at Point Park, Carnegie Institute and Carlow College. Family life always centered around ballet, even in the early days.

Eldest daughter Kathy, 41 and a senior vice president of Jones Apparel Group in New Jersey, recalls attending PBT rehearsals with coloring books and crayons. She later studied at PBT and played Clara in the company's "Nutcracker" at age 12.

Gedeon's children would receive scholarships to study with the best, such as Joffrey Ballet and the School of American Ballet in New York City and Pennsylvania Ballet, but the hard work and dedication paid other dividends. Lori, 37, teaches at Head Start, and Amy, 26, is a second-year resident at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia. The youngest, Kelly, 23, works for Newell Rubbermaid Co. in Pittsburgh.

Family life would eventually center around her ballet school, even for husband Ken,

who works as a building engineer for the University of Pittsburgh. He has built almost every studio, constructed sets, videotaped the productions and helped on stage crew.

"He's mom's right-hand man," says Kathy.

She recalls, "We never knew any other way. Every minute was productive. We worked around her hours, but when she was home, she was 100 percent."



### **Nurturing a school**

Gedeon began in 1983 with one room in St. Elizabeth grade school in Pleasant Hills, where she lives. But her outgoing personality, unceasing energy and nurturing philosophy caused students to flock to her classes. She moved to nearby St. Francis school for nine years, then expanded to PYB's current location in Bethel Park in a former

restaurant.

At the end of the month, just a week after the Byham performances, PYB will move once again to its largest facility yet, 24,000 square feet on Industrial Boulevard, just five minutes away.

Gedeon was forced to dip into her husband's retirement fund for a \$20,000 security deposit.

It's a cash flow problem that has always plagued Gedeon. Any extra money went to make PYB better, she argues -- a new drop for the Snow Scene, just the right tutu for "Serenade," an array of guest teachers like New York City Ballet's Suki Schorer and Garielle Whittle or famed ballerina Gelsey Kirkland.

Gedeon's pursuit of excellence sometimes hampers the chase for that elusive balanced budget. For the second time in PYB history, budgetary concerns and "issues of authority" have her at odds with her executive board.

This time, four of 12 members have chosen to resign, including board president Rachel Rossi, who said, "[The board members] feels a fiduciary responsibility to act in the company's best interests."

### **All in the details**

Nonetheless, Gedeon continues to enjoy the support of the board majority, not to mention most of the parents of children in the school. And ultimately, she asserts, the children are the real bottom line.

She uses her 1993 GMC van, fondly referred to by all as the "Mother Ship," to take students to auditions in New York City, Chautauqua, Saratoga Springs, Louisville and Jackson, Miss. If a student cannot attend an audition in Pittsburgh, she packs him or her into the car and heads to New York City.

Nothing escapes Gedeon's eye. She personally works to fit the shank of each student's pointe shoes until his or her feet achieve the pristine clarity and uniformity that she wants.

"I guess I'm the hands-on type," she says with a shrug.

Indeed, she once loaded a group of mothers into her car and went to New York to view the World Trade Center after Sept. 11, then picked up just the right kind of fabric for an upcoming "Nutcracker." It was a one-day trip.

Everyone at the studio has her telephone number and e-mail, and all problems are answered within 24 hours.

But all of this attention to detail has taken its toll. In recent years, Gedeon has suffered from a laundry list of ailments -- diabetes, kidney stones, carcinoid cancer among them. She also took care of her ailing mother, who has since died, and still watches over daughter Lori, who has lupus. Existing on a few hours sleep each night, she continues to be driven, ignoring physical problems and canceling doctors' appointments.

Still, Gedeon says, "I feel stronger now than I have in a long time. I'm ready to take on the world -- more or less -- maybe with some sleep."

With the new building a reality, she dares once again to embrace a longtime dream of a professional company dedicated to contemporary choreography while keeping her students in the PYB fold. There is even a separate entrance in the new building and a suite of rooms seemingly built for that purpose.

It's the students who are thirsty for more. When Gedeon began, she kept students until age 12, then sent them on to other schools. But they begged to stay longer, so she established a high school program in cooperation with several school districts. Dancers would attend their respective schools in the morning and report for class and rehearsal from 2 until 6 p.m.

Gedeon watches them like a hawk. "My mother said that I could find a grain of rice in a bed of sand," she says. "I try to be cheerful, but I have to be the heavy, too."

She cajoles them to excel, often hounds them to smile.

"I can't stand looking at a dull dancer who doesn't feel the music," she states. "But I never give up on anyone. They just need confidence and I believe in them."

And the students know. Adelynn Whiting commutes from New Castle every day. Senior Kelsey Foss was accepted at Carnegie Mellon University but might transfer to another school with a formal dance program. "I wasn't thinking," she says.

After attending a PYB summer session, Anna Carapellotti moved here from Georgia with her family.

## **A new beginning**

The PYB company has performed at nursing homes, schools and Camp Laugh-a-lot, where special-needs children audiences appreciate the "touch of the tutu." But the Byham performance is the culmination of a year's work, with full production values that give Gedeon's students a professional setting for their efforts.

This year's program will feature sections of George Balanchine's "Serenade" and "Stars and Stripes," Jerome Robbins' "Circus Polka," Allen Bowman's "Mozartina," Ruth Leney-Midkiff's "Passages" and an assortment of works designed for the littlest of her bright and eager dancers.

Katrina Killian, a former NYCB soloist who set "Stars and Stripes," marvels at the students' "sheer desire and enthusiasm" and Gedeon's "brilliant" direction for the company.

"Jean's vision of classical ballet is right," she says. "She knows what food to give her students. Even after a week of teaching here in New York, I'm happy to hop a plane and work with them."

With the anniversary in place and a new building on the horizon, the Byham performance will mark the end of an era and the beginning of a bright new segment of PYB. Does Gedeon see it all coming to an end?

"Maybe in five years," she ventures.

But there are those who believe Gedeon will never stop, for teaching is as beloved as family and as perfect as a well-executed pirouette.

*Pittsburgh Youth Ballet will present its annual spring performance at the Byham Theater at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets: \$20; 412-835-1250 or 412-835-1335.*

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