

## American Youth Ballet founder keeps a new generation of dancers on their toes

Sunday, June 15th 2008, 3:20 PM



American Youth Ballet founder and dance instructor Elizabeth Flores in her dance studio in Battery Park.

At the company's spring recital last weekend, the youngest performer was 2, and the eldest 72.

Elizabeth Flores started ballet when she was 8 years old as a way of meeting other children.

By 13, she discovered she had a knack for teaching others the difference between *petit* and *grande* cabrioles.

Now Flores, 28, who trained with the Bolshoi Ballet Academy and at the Julliard School of Music and once taught ballet classes at Carnegie Hall, is passing her knowledge and skill on to more than 110 students from around the city at the New American Youth Ballet, the dance company she runs with her mother, Bonnie, in Manhattan's Battery Park neighborhood.

The school held its spring recital last weekend in the ballet studios at nearby Stuyvesant High School. The youngest performer was 2; the oldest, 72.

"Our program is all-inclusive," Flores said. "Every student dances in our performances."

New American doesn't turn away students for financial reasons, she said. Families who can't come up with the weekly or monthly fees can put whatever they can in a donation box on the receptionist's desk.

"We have overhead, but I have students who [find] buying a MetroCard ... a struggle," Flores said.

Born in upstate Binghamton, Flores was home-schooled by her parents, Robert and Bonnie. Her mother, a former dancer who with her husband sold real estate in Binghamton, introduced her daughter to ballet to help her meet other children.

Flores found she not only loved ballet, she was good at it. She got the teaching bug at 13 when an instructor asked her to choreograph a piece to perform with fellow students. "That opened the door for me," Flores said. "It showed me I could do it, and I enjoyed it."

When the Binghamton school where she practiced closed, Flores and her mother opened Carousel City Ballet, named for the carousel rides in the area. Like New American, Carousel waived fees for families that could not pay, she said.

The school caught on, Flores said, eventually filling a 2,000-seat theater for one of its recitals.

Flores moved to Manhattan in 2000 to study voice and musical theater at Julliard. She and her mother - who is still a partner with her at New American - rented dance studio time and held classes at Carnegie Hall. She also was head of the summer dance program at Ballet Academy East and artistic director of the Harkness Youth Ballet of the 92nd Street Y.

Flores started New American in 2001 in the Carnegie Hall space. The school moved to Battery Park after Sept. 11 because "there were a lot of children down here with a real need for recreation."

The school moved from space to space in the area before settling at its present 750-square-foot studio at 2 South End Ave.

Several students are creating great careers, including Shaughn Adama, 9, who won a full scholarship to train at the American Ballet Theatre this summer.

"That's what keeps me going," Flores said. "She's very focused. You see they're moving on to achieve."

"Elizabeth has a lot of grit and determination and a lot of talent," said Robert Townley, executive director of Manhattan Youth, a recreational program in lower Manhattan. "She's doing so well, and she's affected the lives of a lot of kids downtown."

*For information, call (212) 945-2926, or check the school's Web site, [www.newamericanyouthballet.org](http://www.newamericanyouthballet.org).*

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