

# OREGON Life

LIFESTYLE • BOOKS • TRAVEL

## A JOURNEY OF THE SPIRIT

An agnostic takes a thoughtful approach to faith/E3

## UNSPOILED FAR CORNER

 Visit undiscovered  
gems in Cambodia/E5


### Buzzworthy

#### WALKING FOR GLADDIE



**A Eugene woman walks** in today's Susan B. Komen Race for the Cure for all the walks her Grandmother Gladdie never got to take, the memories she never got to share and the dreams unfulfilled. See her Write On column, Page E7.

#### HOMEGROWN AUTHORS



**A new crop of books** from small Oregon publishers offers a fresh and lively addition to the fall reading list. Those with new works include Portland author Mary Rechner, Eugene poet Cecelia Hagen (above) and Eugene first-time novelist Guy Maynard. See The Local Shelf, Page E3.

#### REACH FOR THE STARS



**The Science Factory** observes the second National Astronomy Day of the year from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. The museum has two new space exhibits, and has scheduled interactive star shows in collaboration with the Pine Mountain Observatory at 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. in the Exploration Dome. Go to sciencefactory.org for more information.

# THE BOYS OF BALLET

Grants allowed academy to begin offering free weekly lessons just for boys who want to dance



PAUL CARTER/The Register-Guard

**The boys-only ballet class** begins with stretching at the barre, where Nathan Rowell and his classmates also hone a sense of poise and grace. The Oregon Ballet Academy offers free classes once a week for boys and young men ages 9 through 21.

By RANDI BJORNSTAD  
The Register-Guard

**T**he Oregon Ballet Academy has the usual throng of girls in ballet flats and leotards practicing their pirouettes and assuming their attitudes, which in ballet doesn't mean being impudent but standing on one leg with the other lifted at a 90-degree angle. But the academy also has something different than most: It has a bunch of boys just as dedicated to turnout, battement and jeté as their female counterparts. The main difference is that the studio offers a weekly class just for boys, and it's free. In the two years since they began their boys-only



**Owen Skornik-Hayes** temporarily drops a knee after giving it all he has. Pushups build upper body strength that the boys will someday need to lift their female counterparts.

program, husband-and-wife OBA owners John Grensback and Megan (pronounced MEE gun) Murphy

have seen their male enrollment grow from a handful to several dozen, ranging in age from 9 years to college

age. "We really wanted to do a program for boys, but we knew it would be hard to get them to come because ballet isn't something most boys think about doing," Murphy said. "But we were able to get some grants, and John does the teaching. It's great to see what these boys have accomplished." Boys who want more than one class a week enroll in coed classes, and the sexes also mix during rehearsals, performances and special academy-wide social events. The boys' class regularly has upwards of 30 stu-

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**View a slideshow** at registerguard.com/ss

**"They do pushups, leaps, turns, big jumps — and they love it."**

— MEGAN MURPHY, OREGON BALLET ACADEMY

### LETTER FROM HARRISBURG

## On the cutting edge of the clothesline movement

By DORCAS SMUCKER  
For The Register-Guard

**I** used to assume that everyone knew how to dry laundry outside on a clothesline. Not that I ever gave it much thought, being born Amish and thus learning early to simply do tasks rather than ponder or talk about them.

Hanging wash on the line was as normal to me as tying my shoes. After my baby sister was

born when I was 6, my older sister and I often hung rows of long, old-fashioned cotton diapers on the wire clotheslines strung between two huge maple trees.

Later, when polyester doubleknit was in style, we washed our heavy, solid-color dresses in the wringer washer and then put them on hangers and hung them in a row outside to dry. Rather than evaporating, the water

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# Ballet: Some students have sights set on dance career

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dents enrolled, and sometimes it swells to at least 40. "It's their own class, different from the girls' classes," Murphy said. "They do pushups, leaps, turns, big jumps — and they love it."

Not only that, but some of the students, including Mayim Stiller, have excelled to the point that they can set their sights on a professional career.

"I've loved dance ever since I was a really little kid," said Stiller, who turns 16 in December. "I did salsa dancing and hip-hop lessons first, and that was fun, but it was the year after I started ballet that I started thinking of dance as a career. I absolutely love all kinds of dance, but I really see ballet as my future."

He started dancing with Grensback at OBA four years ago, back when there might be at most two or three boys in a class. Now, he hopes that in a year — two at the most — he will be dancing in an apprenticeship program with a major dance company.

"I work pretty hard," Stiller said. "Dancing as much as I do now is like having a part-time job. My social life is mostly my ballet friends, and then I have school. That's what I do."

Grensback's teaching "is really excellent," he said. "He challenges you to go as far as you can and then a little further. Even if you can't do something completely at first, eventually you get to the point where you can do it. It's one of his strengths."

But ballet, Grensback-style, is not for sissies. "You have to be really strong — you have to learn how to hold your arms, jump high and hold your leg out straight, and that takes a lot of strength," Stiller said.

"He challenges you to go as far as you can and then a little further."

**MAYIM STILLER**  
ONE OF JOHN GRENSBACK'S STUDENTS

"It's not simple to lift a girl above your head, and we have to be able to do that. I do at least 200 pushups a day."

Both Grensback and Murphy had professional dancing careers. She grew up dancing in Guam, then went on to the Atlanta and Houston ballets, "but I was not a principal dancer — I was lucky to be in the corps," she said.

The pair met at the Houston Ballet, where he was a principal dancer, following stints with the Joffrey and New York City ballets. Murphy stopped dancing when they married, she went back to school and she had their first child. Grensback stopped dancing professionally at 34, because "I think it's a good thing to go out when you're still on top," he said. "I've seen too many people wait too long to stop."

His decision to retire "was a defining moment," he said. "I was lifting a ballerina over my head, and she was mad about something and wasn't helping, so it was really difficult. It was the mid-lift at the beginning of the snow scene in 'The Nutcracker,' and in my head I said, 'I'm going to retire at the end of this season.'"

Teaching ballet was a natural next step. The couple relocated from Texas to Guam in 1990 to be nearer Murphy's family and started a ballet studio, where they had 350 students within 18 months.



John Grensback teaches the boys' ballet class.

After 13 years there, they wanted to return to the United States, so they started looking for the right place.

"I had performed in 'Cinderella' in the Hult Center's first season, and I loved Eugene," Grensback said. "Megan liked the size of the town, the University of Oregon and the fact that there were thousands of kids around, so we decided to come here. Now we have our footprint on the ground here — we are home."

He teaches and she manages the studio and also works full time as a New York Life Insurance agent.

Their partnership dates back to the beginning of their 24-year marriage and the raising of three children who range in age from 21 to 12.

For Grensback, teaching ballet to boys is a matter of both looking back and paying forward.

"I learned from Ed Parish in Chicago — he was kind of like the Father Flanagan (founder of Boys Town) of ballet," he said. "He took eight kids at a time from the state foster care system, got them

## OREGON BALLET ACADEMY

The academy offers a free weekly class for boys ages 9 to 21, as well as a variety of coeducational classes.

**When:** Wednesdays from 6:15 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

**Where:** 1645 Oak St.

**Next performance:** The Nutcracker Ballet on Thanksgiving weekend, at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Nov. 27 and 28 at Lane Community College.

**Information:** 541-338-7800 or [www.oregonballetacademy.com](http://www.oregonballetacademy.com)

off medications and threw them into ballet every day. He lived next door to my family, and he 'fostered' me, too, and then shipped me off to New York — with my parents approval — when I was 15."

Grensback started at the School of American Ballet, founded in 1934 by George Balanchine and run by the New York City Ballet. "I got into the New York City Ballet when Balanchine was still around," he said, "but it really wasn't my style. I stayed there 2½ years, and then I went to the Joffrey Ballet for 5½ years — that was an incredible experience."

At 25, "I had my 'midlife' crisis. I quit and went back to Illinois to help Ed Parish on the farm he had bought to raise the boys," Grensback said. "We called it Dance Farm. Some of those boys were really rough — I had to lock my suitcase, and then the suitcase was missing."

Almost immediately a friend at the Houston Ballet, artistic director Ben Stevenson, called Grensback, who returned to the stage for

another 10 years. "That was a world-class ballet company — they even flew their orchestra over to Paris to perform with the ballet," he said. "But by the time I was 34, my body started saying, 'no,' and I knew it was time to go."

At that point, "I kind of turned into another Ed Parish," he said. "I had a younger brother, and I had pulled him along and he had become a professional dancer, too. Ed Parish influenced us to do something with our lives."

He tries to instill the same work ethic and enjoyment of dance in his students, both male and female, "and I'd say 85 percent live up to the challenge," Grensback said. "But dance has to be an enrichment, not just hard work. I like to say we have serious dance, and we have serious fun."

It obviously looked that way to 8-year-old John Toomey before he started ballet lessons a year ago, his mother, Emilie Toomey, said.

"John has a twin sister, and an older sister who's 10 and started ballet at the academy," she said. "After her first performance, my son went up to John all by himself and said, 'Can I start?' I think he saw all the other boys and the camaraderie they had even while they were working hard. He took a class with his sister for a year, and now he does two (mixed) classes and the boys' class. One of the reasons we encourage them is John's expectation that you have to work hard to achieve."

In fact, when he asks his students what his favorite word is, Grensback said, the answer comes back instantly: "Focus!"

In contrast, if she asks the same question, Murphy jokes, the kids yell back: "Chocolate!"

# Smucker: Gardens, aprons and mending rediscovered

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slowly flowed to the hems of the dresses and then dripped off.

And much later in a small, remote Indian village in Canada, I pinned innumerable tiny socks and shirts to ropes strung in a haphazard web between birch trees. Then I would go inside and look out the window and sure enough, there was my neighbor lady Clara, the chief's wife, who never asked permission, busily propping up this clothesline with a long stick and adjusting a towel over there so it wouldn't flap against a tree.

By the time we moved to our current house I had a modern washer and dryer, but a clothesline was equally a necessity, and my husband built a confident set for me with three hefty wooden T's and rows of strong plastic-coated wire that after 10 years still doesn't need props, even when heavy with wet jeans hung open to the wind as my mother taught me.

When summer returned for a warm, brief visit late this September, I spent three days catching up with my laundry — down to throw rugs and picnic tablecloths and my son's Oregon Ducks hat — and hung all 10 loads on the clothesline.

The sky was a rare, clear blue and the sun shone its approval on my upturned face and the wet sheets flapped rebelliously in the breeze as I wrestled them out of the basket and into proper folded-in-half, pinned-lengthwise, taught-by-my-mother order.

Hours later I took down sun-warmed towels and pajamas and gathered them into baskets, savoring the scent of sun and wind and clean, warm cotton and the rightness and satisfaction of it all.

Since hanging laundry on the line was a household task I never thought much about, I was startled a few years ago to read that a new movement was afoot, something unusual and a bit daring, they said, raising the neighbors'

eyebrows and described in terms such as sustainability and other words prefixed by "eco." No, not hay-bale houses or pedal-powered cars. It was, of all things, hanging laundry outside to dry. "Solar clothes dryer" was the new name for clotheslines, and its proponents were called "right-to-dry activists."

It is a very strange thing to find an old tradition and habit of mine suddenly featured as cutting edge and The Latest Fad, since my daughters and friends will testify that the words "cutting edge" and I almost never appear in the same sentence. "More neighbors are switching to it, so you get to be a trendsetter," gushed a website devoted to modern laundry methods.

Gardening was back as well, I found out, and raising chickens, baking bread and mending jeans, even among city people, not just earthy types living on back roads. Even wearing aprons made a comeback. My 90-year-old mother always wore them both for modesty and to make her dresses last longer, and she still has a row of aprons hanging in her laundry room — from ragged ones for yard work to nice ones for serving dinner to guests. Today, aprons are everywhere from fancy shops to mommy blogs to sewing magazines, as though they were invented only last week by a clever young designer.

What was refreshing about this "new" trend was that young people of the laptop and cell phone generation were evaluating their options and deciding that these old-fashioned methods were actually enjoyable, the best use of their resources and best for their health and finances. I found it fascinating as they debated and analyzed things I had never questioned, things as automatic to me as saying "Hello" when I answered the phone.

My friend Robin, who had rejected her mother's bean-canning ways, detailed on her blog, Blue Skies Urban Farm, how she chose, years

later, to return to those same traditions, but with the difficult twist of applying them in an urban setting. She wrote about finding the right kind of bamboo clothespins and drying laundry in the garage on racks when it rained, of finding beauty in the utilitarian, or what she calls the Aesthetic of the Useful. "I'm finding that the more I live around people who value utility, the more aesthetic I see in this kind of lifestyle," she said.

Sometimes I want to wave my hand at Robin and other newcomers, gushing over the wonders of homemade strawberry jam in repurposed yogurt cups, "Hello! Some of us have been doing this stuff since before you were born! We could have told you all about it if you would have asked."

I don't regret all the simple, ecologically sound traditions I've kept up, but sometimes I wonder

if I missed something by doing these things without ever deliberately choosing them. Who knew one could find a sense of discovery and purpose in washing and reusing Ziploc bags until they wore out?

On the other hand, though, I'm realizing how blessed I've been to experience this as normal life, and not have to unearth all these skills myself, research them, find mentors to teach me, and make a hundred mistakes until I finally get them right. And I have always known the joy of sheets dried outside on a summer day.

I find a similar joy in knowing that the children of these new pioneers will think it's perfectly normal to eat a salad from the garden or gather an egg from a nest for breakfast or wrestle with a wet, wind-whipped sheet, folded in half, clothes-pinning it neatly along the edge just as their mothers

taught them.

Dorcas Smucker of

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