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**the wooden floor**<sup>®</sup>

## Driving Social Innovation With a Plan Ahead Strategy

By Dawn S. Reese, Chief Executive Officer, The Wooden Floor

Last March, there was a cataclysmic shift to operating businesses in a virtual environment – including nonprofit organizations which are more so traditionally place-based, by responding to community need directly, and in-person. In a matter of days and weeks, the nonprofit sector responded impressively to meet the new virtual format by deploying design-thinking practices of: listening and learning, developing new systems and programs, piloting and testing innovative solutions and evaluating in rapid-time which ideas were making a difference. Those nonprofits who are driving social innovation by combining design-thinking with strong leadership and financial management along with technical infrastructure and steady community support, have been able to remain nimble, plan, and adapt quickly to the changing economic, societal and program delivery challenges of our time.

### Value of a Plan Ahead Team

During those first months of the pandemic, The Wooden Floor wanted to take a long view on the potential impact Covid-19 may have on student development in low-income communities because of the 10-year commitment we make to our 475 students and their families. The Wooden Floor is one of the nation's leading social innovators and one of the foremost creative youth development nonprofit organizations. Since 1983, we have served over 95,000 youth, and our strategic solution to today's greatest social challenges is to transform young people in low-income communities through the power of dance and access to higher education. **Since 2005, 100% of our graduates have enrolled in higher education.**



In April 2020, there was evidence emerging early on that distance learning was going to have a long-term impact on students within the K-12 system and beyond the classroom into their homes. In order to focus both on the present demands during the crisis with an eye towards the future impact, we created a two-track system for planning. First, our Senior Leadership Team responded by pivoting our dance education, academic, college and career readiness and family services programs to a virtual environment. Concurrently, we created a Plan Ahead Team whose goals were to collect forward-looking data and intelligence on the impact of Covid-19 in four main areas: Organizational Strategy; Education (K-12); Higher Education; and Health and Human Services. Simultaneously, both teams met weekly and we were able to focus on deploying and executing on virtual curriculum design and services, while developing a Plan Ahead Framework which was guided by an article from McKinsey & Company that outlined a five-part strategic crisis action plan for a changing environment: "1) Get a realistic view of your starting position; 2) Develop scenarios for multiple versions of your future; 3) Establish your posture and broad direction of travel; 4) Determine actions and strategic moves that are robust across scenarios; 5) Set trigger points that drive your organization to act at the right time.", **McKinsey and Company, Getting Ahead of the Next stage of the Coronavirus.**

### Planning Ahead Makes an Immediate Difference

We have found there is an interesting duality that can equally exist when

responding to incredible challenges during a crisis while maintaining a hopeful optimism for the future – this is where planning ahead can make the difference.

By keeping our eyes strategically focused on The Wooden Floor's future, we have been able to:

**Learn** by gathering internal and external data on the long-term impact of Covid-19 on low-income communities across the nation, as well as surveying our own students and families in Orange County so we can remain responsive and innovative as we launch our next 10-year Strategic Vision 2021-2031 amidst the sea of uncertainty.

**Collaborate and Design** in order to create our core principles for our virtual curriculum development as well as key organizational indicators that have helped us to navigate any new challenges or opportunities that we encounter by working with external teams of skills-based volunteers from **Edwards Lifesciences** and **PIMCO**.

**Evaluate** how our copyrighted Theory of Change adapts to a virtual or hybrid model in response to distance learning, which may inform future creative youth development programming locally, and nationally with our licensed partner **CityDance DREAM** in Washington, DC.

**Engage** with both internal and external stakeholders throughout the crisis planning to ensure that we communicated our challenges and sought feedback on our proposed solutions. As an example, once it became evident that over 200 of our students would not have laptop computers to participate in our summer



programs and their school work, we reached out to our corporate and foundation partners who wanted to provide special Covid-19 relief funds: **Capital Group, Kingston Technology, Sun Foundation and Sharon Mae Fund** and we are grateful that they collectively gathered together and provided free laptops for those students.

### Planning Ahead as part of Strategic Planning

As The Wooden Floor embarks on our strategic planning process to launch our next Strategic Vision 2021-2031, we will be more confident as we begin the process because of the data collection, analysis and key indicators that we have compiled over the past four months. Strategic Planning is essential, even amidst a pandemic. With the data provided through the Plan Ahead process, we will be able to create some educated assumptions, ideate on new organizational metrics and look for opportunities for continued virtual connection and programming that will set the course for the next decade of impact for our students and our community.

Join us at **TheWoodenFloor.org** to learn about the promise that we make to each of our students: **from here you can step anywhere.**

Dawn S. Reese is the Chief Executive Officer of The Wooden Floor, a nonprofit organization which has received numerous awards including the 2018 New York Life Foundation AIM High Afterschool Award for Middle School Programming, as well as a feature in the Stanford Social Innovation Review. During Reese's tenure, The Wooden Floor opened its second location in Santa Ana, and licensed its model in Washington, DC. Reese received the 2019 Women Breaking Barriers Award from Connected Women of Influence, the 2018 Founders Award from the Institute for Community Impact, the 2016 Center for Leadership Award for Innovation from California State University Fullerton and the 2015

Difference Makers Award for Small Nonprofit Person of the Year from the Santa Ana Chamber of Commerce. Reese serves on the Board of Directors for OneOC as treasurer, Orange County Music and Dance, Passkeys Foundation as vice chair, and the Santa Ana Chamber of Commerce. She also serves on the Board of Advisors for the Center for Leadership - Mihaylo College of Business and Economics at California State University, Fullerton; Institute for Community Impact; and the Orange County Business Council's Latino Education Attainment Committee.

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# WE ARE CREATING **GENERATIONAL CHANGE THROUGH THE POWER OF DANCE**

Founded in 1983, The Wooden Floor is one of the foremost creative youth development nonprofit organizations in the country. We transform the lives of young people in low-income communities through the power of dance and access to higher education.

We give young people the tools and guidance to follow a path out of poverty by serving students in grades 3-12 after-school for up to 10 years with a comprehensive approach that is grounded in exploratory dance education which is strategically integrated with long-term mentoring relationships, academic services, college and career readiness, and family support services.

In Orange County and through national licensed partners, our long-term approach fosters the confidence and gifts within each child to innovate, communicate, and collaborate - skills necessary for success in school and in life.

**100 percent of students who graduate from The Wooden Floor immediately enroll in colleges and universities across the nation.**

Students at The Wooden Floor consistently exceed their peers nationally. Our students become change agents and beacons of hope within their own families, their neighborhoods, our community, and our world.

**JOIN US TO MOVE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE FORWARD.**

Find out more at [TheWoodenFloor.org](http://TheWoodenFloor.org)

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