ECC seeks 'LIFT' in bringing ballet to underprivileged youth

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In its efforts to bring cultural and educational opportunities to homeless children and other underprivileged youth, Edgecombe Community College is asking the community for a big "LIFT."

On Thursday evening, officials at ECC held an informational program, which included an appeal for support, ahead of the New York Theatre Ballet school's student workshop and free performances slated for the community college's Tarboro campus in early March.

As part of its outreach, the New York Theatre Ballet, founded in 1978, brings dance to underserved communities by touring smaller cities across the United States. Its relationship with ECC dates to 2012, according to Doneva Chavis, ECC's cultural arts director. It has appeared in Tarboro nine times since then, and in recent years has come on an annual basis, except during the COVID-19 pandemic, she said.

Thursday's presentation, attended by a small group of supporters from the community, featured snippets of performances by NYTB, along with the trailer for the documentary film "LIFT," which focuses on the ballet company's efforts to make dance education accessible to inner-city youth who lack the financial wherewithal to pursue lessons on their own. Attendees also saw a taped appeal from Steven Melendez, NYTB's artistic director.

Released in 2022, "LIFT," named for NYTB's youth outreach program, tells the stories of Melendez, who grew up in a Bronx shelter, and three of his New York City students — Victor Abreu, 13; Yolanssie Cardona, 11; and Sharia Blockwood, 8 — who live in similar circumstances.

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Andrew Votipka, Edgecombe Community College's chief financial officer, discusses the community support for the New York Theatre Ballet school's student workshop and free performances slated for the Tarboro campus in early March. The workshop and performances have become something of an annual tradition.

The film shows how these students leverage ballet to change their lives and find their identities.

Chavis stressed the importance of bringing cultural education to local underserved youth with programs like the planned NYTB workshop and performances. A graphic on the screen at ECC's McIntyre Auditorium showed that a full course of private ballet lessons can run anywhere from $1,650 to $5,275.

"The costs can be out of reach" for many families, Chavis said. "If you think of children living in a shelter or who are homeless, this is something they may never get to enjoy."

Free instruction from NYTB's outreach program will be offered to 900 local students on March 4, Chavis said. Most students at the workshops are from Edgecombe County, Chavis said, but others come in from Nash County and Pitt County. The workshop will be followed by a free performance for the students on the afternoon of March 4, and another free performance, this one for the public, which will be held at 7 p.m. March 5 at the Astemo Center on the Tarboro campus.

However, since nothing free is really free, Chavis noted that the annual program runs an average $16,000 production cost for ECC. The visit "is only possible because of community support," Chavis said. "Please spread the word. ... We try to advertise as best we can, but that is an expense."

One way to keep those expenses down is to find local housing volunteers to host NYTB personnel during their week in Tarboro. Leda Kohler, treasurer of the Tar River Players theater company, is quarterbacking those efforts.

"There's a group of individuals who live in the (Tarboro) Historic District that have been kind enough, on a regular basis, to open their homes," Kohler said. "A lot of people in the Historic District have these relatively large homes, which was great when you were raising your large families, but now everybody's grown up and moved away. ... And that helps the college because even though (the program is) free to the community, it's not free to produce."

Kohler said the program has gotten positive feedback from the dancers.

"They really appreciate the hospitality," Kohler said. "They're right there downtown. and they can walk to the area businesses on Main Street, go get a cup of coffee or whatever."

Local restaurants also help defray expenses by donating food for the visitors, Chavis said.

Andrew Votipka, ECC's chief financial officer, said the community has traditionally been very responsive to the ballet week.

"Support for it is heavy," he said. "The community wants them to come back and has an expectation that they'll be here."

Attendance at the workshops and performances over the years has topped 14,000, he said.

"LIFT" can be viewed on Prime Video, Chavis said.

Those wishing to donate financially or support the outreach program in another way can contact Chavis at 252-618-6618. Those who want to serve as a host family can also go to tarriverplayers.org and fill out the "Contact us" form, Kohler said.