

Flooded out, Morton Street Dance Center still finds its 'Neverland'

April's floods left the school without rehearsal studios one month before the big annual concert

May 30, 2014|By Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun

When 12-year-old Leilani Hines wanted to fly away to Neverland, she just had to close her eyes, point her toes, curve one arm above her head, and picture herself springing above the ground in the ballet move known as a grand jete.

In her imagination, Leilani soared to that magical land above the floodwaters that destroyed the Morton Street Dance Center on April 30.

It was a refuge from her worries that costumes, which had to be ordered 12 weeks in advance, were mud-splattered and ruined. It was a comfort when she stressed out about not having any place to rehearse — and whether that would jeopardize the big spring concert scheduled for Saturday that she and her classmates had been preparing for all year.

Instead, Leilani envisioned herself practicing her steps as the chief crocodile who munches on the hand of Captain Hook in "Neverland: The Story of Peter Pan."

"I eat, sleep and breathe dance," said Leilani, a student at Sudbrook Magnet Middle School. "Dancing is all I want to do. When Miss Donna showed us the pictures of the studios after the flood, my heart just sank. I felt as though my home had been taken away from me, and I started crying."

"Miss Donna" is Donna Jacobs, the dancer and choreographer who founded Morton Street Dance Center in 1992. In the past two decades, the academy, which enrolls primarily African-American youths, has become one of Baltimore's most respected private arts education institutions.

Jacobs' dance studio was far from the only enterprise to suffer from standing water, which in some places was 5 feet deep. The floods devastated nearly every home or business in the Woodberry neighborhood that had a first floor, from Nepenthe Homebrew, a beer- and wine-making shop that has been closed since the flood, to the Potters Guild of Baltimore, where the water wrecked nearly the entire inventory.

It could take years for the neighborhood to rebound from the financial wallop and the blow to morale. But only the damage to the dance studio had the potential to break the hearts of 150 children.

"We knew we couldn't let that happen," said Jacobs. "These kids are so triumphant, we had to find a way to have the show."

Jacobs realized that her academy, which operates on the ground floor of 3600 Clipper Mill Road at the bottom of a hill abutting the Jones Falls, was at risk for flooding. When Tropical Storm Isabel threatened in 2003, staff members carted everything portable to a fourth-floor storage room. When the remnants of Hurricane Sandy menaced in 2012, they put down sandbags.

"I was in denial this year," Jacobs said.

"I thought, 'We're going to be fine. We've always been fine.' We've been here for 10 years. We've had worse storms, and we've never had a drop of water in the place."

Until now.

The reality, Jacobs knows, is that all the advance preparations in the world would not have made any difference.

The most valuable part of any dance studio is its sprung wood floors, which absorb shocks, enhancing performance and reducing injuries. Morton Street's floors, which have a layer of sponges inserted between the concrete bottom and plywood surface, can be ruined by less than an inch of water.

"When we see her doctors now, they can't believe that she's 9 years old now and dancing," says her [mom](#), Karen Smith. "They can't believe how healthy and beautiful she is."

And Jacobs had to cobble together a concert so that 17-year-old Willis Brandon, a student at Baltimore's School for the Arts, could [perform](#) the role of Peter Pan.

Brandon dances because it gives him joy, but he also dances to honor his adopted godfather, Algernon Campbell, a performer and choreographer who [teaches](#) at Morton Street.

"He's always there when I need him," Brandon said. "If I'm ever sick or if I hurt myself when I'm dancing, he's just a phone call away. If I need him and he's halfway across the country, I know that he'll be there for me."

It helps that Jacobs, a senior vice president at the University of Maryland Medical System, is an organizational dynamo. When misfortune strikes, she doesn't stop to think about how bad she feels. Instead, she springs immediately into action.

"We knew we'd have the show some type of way," said Morgan James, 16, who plays Wendy. "Putting [students](#) into a performing environment is what Miss Donna lives to do."

Jacobs immediately sent thousands of [costume](#) pieces to a cleaner who specializes in repairing flood-damaged clothing. While the fate of the outfits for other concerts remains unclear, all of the difficult-to-obtain "Neverland" costumes could be salvaged.

She posted a plea on Facebook to borrow temporary rehearsal space. Within a day, she had a schedule lined up at Park [School](#), at Coppin State University and at Yorkwood Elementary School.

It didn't matter that the kids at times had to rehearse in a school library or cafeteria. It didn't even matter when a tree fell outside Yorkwood, knocking out electricity for the entire building before a key rehearsal.

"One of my [parents](#) said to me, 'Oh, I get it, now,' " Jacobs recalled. " 'If you give these children a floor, they will dance.' "

For two performances Saturday, "Neverland" will be staged at Towson University. McKinley will put on her beloved zebra costume with the wide ruff of black and white feathers that makes her feel like prancing. Brandon will grab a fake sword and prepare to battle Captain Hook. James will take a deep breath and find that her nervousness magically disappears the moment she steps on stage.

But first, Leilani will suit up as the head croc. She'll run through a few of her dance moves out of sight of the arriving audience. She might practice flopping to the ground, or opening her arms wide, fingers pointing inward, to simulate a pair of cavernous jaws.

Then the curtain will rise and she'll be exactly where wants to be — in Neverland.

mary.mccauley@baltsun.com