



ARTS & CULTURE



This Philadelphia institution opened a dance store to fill a void

The Rock School for Dance Education is diversifying its revenue sources with a new dance shop and keeping an eye on the future of government funding.



A ballerina tutu in the window of The Dance Boutique, a retail store opened by the Rock School of Dance Education.

Alejandro A. Alvarez / Staff Photographer

by Ariana Perez-Castells and Ellen Dunkel

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Having a first fitting for pointe shoes is a “big deal” in a dancer’s life, said Peter Stark, president and director of the Rock School for Dance Education in Philadelphia.

“When a young dancer moves on pointe, it’s a momentous step in their progression in studying classical ballet,” Stark said. “You get the whole family, you get pictures. It’s a whole ordeal. It’s very exciting.”

While some dance gear can be purchased online, pointe shoes require an in-person fitting, said Stark, who noted that students have gone as far as New York or Miami to get the shoes, which come in myriad modalities and can cost \$80 or more.

Now, dancers in the Philadelphia region can get their ballet shoes locally, as well as other dance apparel. The Rock School opened a store on the ground floor of its main location at South Broad and Washington Streets last week and is offering pointe shoe fittings by appointment.

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The dance shop fills a void in the city, which has seen brick and mortar dance stores close in recent years. It's also a way for the school to diversify its revenue streams as it keeps an eye out on the future of federal funding.

And while the shop is convenient for the school's students, the goal is to serve the Philadelphia dance community generally, said Stark.

"We really want to support all of the dance schools and all of the dance companies in Philadelphia ... because dancers need these supplies," he said.

The origin of the store: a 'perfect storm'

For more than 125 years, dancers and [students relied on Baum's Dancewear](#) for their leotards, tights, and shoes. [Mummers](#) shopped there as well.

Baum's, a family business, opened in [Kensington](#) in 1887, later moved to South Street and then to South 11th Street, where it stayed for 75 years, and also opened a [Marlton](#) location. The company relocated its Philly store to [South Philadelphia](#) in 2014. Both locations have since closed.

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Another dance store, [the Rosin Box, also had a long run in Philadelphia](#). It opened in 1977 and closed 41 years later [in 2018 when the owners retired](#).

When Stark [joined the Rock School in 2022](#), there was already a "very successful" internal boutique selling items to students out of an upper floor space in the school building. It also had a pop-up market during performances. Stark noticed that the store brought in a decent amount of revenue from the events, he says.

"There's this perfect storm of already having a successful boutique, seeing the need in Philadelphia, and the potential for a new revenue stream to enable us to do our good work," he said.

For years, the original door to the school building on Broad Street has been closed, as students and visitors enter through the Washington Street entrance. Now the door that lines up with the school address of 1101 S. Broad Street, is open, welcoming passersby into the store. Stark estimates that remodeling the space, which used to hold two offices, cost roughly \$150,000 including renovations to the lobby.

The shop will be open Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 1 p.m. to 7p.m. and Saturdays 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Stark said the goal is to build up a catalog of pointe shoes. He already has plans to expand the store to accommodate this in a second phase of renovations.

“The most successful stores like this can have upward of \$150,000 of inventory of pointe shoes,” he said. “It’s almost like a car dealership. You have to create this inventory so people can come and get the car that they want and the color that they want.”

It will take a while to fill that inventory at the new shop, Stark says, but they are listening to customers and working to quickly get them what they need. He expects it will take a couple of years to turn a profit.

The financial picture

The shop opens as the school is keeping an eye on potential changes in government funding, said Stark.

President [Donald Trump](#)’s administration ordered [a freeze on federal funding in January](#) as it reviewed programs, and the White House later [rescinded the](#) guidance. The National Endowment for the Arts

announced in February that it was [ending a grant disbursement program of \\$2.8 million](#) called “Challenge America,” and instead advised that applications to its general fund would be prioritized that “celebrate and honor the nation’s rich artistic heritage and creativity,” as the 250th anniversary of the country approaches.

“It still remains to be determined, but certainly there are significant cuts to many departments, and that filters from the federal level to a state level,” said Stark. “When we see that contributed revenue might be threatened with potential changes, we have to find that money somewhere else.”

As a nonprofit, the goal is not to make money, but to cover expenses including maintenance of the buildings. It can be a struggle, says Stark.

“We are anticipating that struggle could get more challenging with what we’re seeing in some of the proposed changes on a federal level,” he said. “We want to be ahead of that, and we don’t want to wait until there’s a problem. We want to proactively step forward and have a solution so that we can keep doing our good work.”

Most of the Rock School of Dance Education’s earned income comes from tuition. Between 3% and 5% of its contributed income comes from government funding, which is one of the hardest sources of income to secure, managing director Arturo Espinoza Jr. says. The rest is from individual and corporate donations.

The school has a \$6.5 million annual budget for its Broad Street location and a satellite site in West Chester. It owns the Broad Street location thanks to a [\\$1.5 million donation in 1999](#) from [Milton L. Rock](#), and it's the organization's "primary asset," Stark said.

"Really we're trying to monetize our asset to support our mission and to support the scholarship and the outreach programming that we do," he said.

The Rock School provides \$1.4 million in scholarships annually.

"We want to keep this art form alive, and we want anybody with a dream and the desire to do this to be able to do so," Stark said.

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