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- [Leadership & Learning](#)
 - [Upcoming Events](#)
 - [Annual Conference](#)
 - [2016 Dance Forum](#)
 - [Past Events](#)
 - [Institute for Leadership Training](#)
 - [Engaging Dance Audiences](#)
 - [Other Professional Development Opportunities](#)
- [Research & Information](#)
 - [National Company Roster](#)
 - [Snapshot of the Field](#)
 - [Member Surveys](#)
 - [Services and Information Requests](#)
 - [Research Resources](#)
 - [Task Force on Dancer Health](#)
- [Advocacy & Visibility](#)
 - [Key Advocacy Issues](#)
 - [Policy and Legislative Updates](#)
 - [Advocacy Resources](#)
 - [Request a Peer Consultation Letter](#)
 - [Scheduling Congressional Visits](#)
 - [DOL Proposed Overtime Reform](#)
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Dance/USA Honors Sarah and Ernest Butler: Choreographing a Life of Wonder and Philanthropy

June 6, 2016

By Forrest Preece

Sarah and Dr. Ernest Butler, Texas natives who have been married for more than 55 years, are in everything for keeps. These unassuming, intelligent, generous people, who made the \$3,500,000 naming gift for Ballet Austin's Butler Dance Education Center and the second largest individual gift in the history of The University of Texas at Austin (a \$55,000,000 endowment for the Butler School of Music), have a lifelong history of remarkable achievement professionally and in the arts world. Ballet Austin, now among the largest ballet companies in the country, owes much of its success to stalwart supporters such as the Butlers. In June, they will receive Dance/USA's Champion Award at the annual conference in Austin for leadership that has sustained and significantly advanced dance in Austin, their home city.

During an interview in their northwest Austin home, Sarah, still a school teacher at heart, refers to her carefully written notes while answering questions. At times, Ernest adds comments. As an example of their tenacity, energy and sense of wonder, long before they became involved in the arts, they took up bird watching. When Ernest was in medical school in Houston in the early 1960s, a friend suggested that they go bird watching with an expert in the field. Soon they learned how to seek and identify avian species. When Dr. Butler, an ear/nose/throat specialist, retired from his medical career in 1989, he and Sarah decided that bird watching and opera would become their passions and they have pursued both with fervor.

Sarah remembers fondly how they joined up with a British group called Birdquest, which is very serious about the practice. As an example of how intensely they pursue a goal, when in Venezuela bird watching, they hunted for a trail that would lead to a rare species called the Andean cock of the rock. As soon as they saw the trail, Ernest ran down the precarious side of the cliff and Sarah followed in a hurry. When they got to the bottom, they saw 25 of the birds and heard them "chorusing." Being brave and taking chances like that led them to see about half the species in the world. In the early 2000s, they were ranked fortieth globally on the official bird watching list.

Their world travels seeing opera also led to their passion for dance. Once, in Vienna to enjoy opera they saw Rudolf Nureyev perform in Swan Lake and it was a revelation. Now Sarah says: "We have seen dance everywhere we have gone – it is in our humanity and it can be a life-changing experience." Whether it is dance in a parade, at a tribal event in Africa or on a patio in a park, whenever they find dance they are thrilled, because, she adds, dance preserves culture worldwide.

Becoming Balletomanes

In the 1980s, the Butlers began attending Ballet Austin performances and by the fall of 1996, Austin arts community leader Terry Long asked Sarah to join the Ballet Austin board. She readily agreed. Soon Sarah became part of a committee to create a foundation that would insure the ballet's ongoing financial

health. She says, “I wanted to be a good board member and do something worthwhile.” Adding that art forms must be supported by looking toward future sustainability. “There are many challenges,” Sarah says. “We have to build new audiences and provide a reserve for difficult years.” She is justifiably proud that starting from an initial gift of \$100,000, Ballet Austin’s endowment is now more than \$4,000,000. Due to prudent financial management, it generates more than \$150,000 to the ballet every June. Of course, the Butlers are looking to increase that endowment and have a vision for funding even more Ballet Austin programs, including new dance works and artist development.

Cookie Ruiz, Ballet Austin’s executive director, recalls the first time the Butlers visited the former company headquarters in the fall of 1996. At the time Ruiz was Ballet Austin’s new development director. She had started a “Lunch and Illumination Series” to introduce the community to the organization because she knew that Ballet Austin was under the radar in Austin and she wanted to change that. It worked. Ruiz remembers that the Butlers were invited to attend one of those luncheons and they arrived 30 minutes early on a day when it was pouring rain and the staff was not quite ready to begin. That was the day the concept of “Butler time” began to take hold in Ruiz’s life. She says that there is the “start time” for each event, and then there is “Butler time” — essentially 30 minutes prior to the posted start time. “Ballet Austin is a better organization for understanding the difference,” Ruiz says.

As another illustration of the Butlers’ commitment to Ballet Austin’s future, in 2013, they established the Butler Fellowship Program, which offers 15 fully underwritten scholarships to outstanding aspiring pre-professional dance students. The fellowship features an innovative and personal approach to traditional, professional-track training. Butler Fellows are selected through Ballet Austin’s Senior Summer Intensive, following a nationwide audition, and participate in up to 17 hours of classes per week. Last year the pool of students comprising Ballet Austin’s Summer Intensive Program came from 125 cities, 38 states and four countries.

Ballet Austin dancer Chelsea Marie Renner, originally from Bozeman, Mont., was one of the first recipients of a training scholarship from the Butlers in 2005. Chelsea was selected to join Ballet Austin II and eventually was invited by Stephen Mills, Ballet Austin’s artistic director, to join the company. Sarah notes that after her initial year with her scholarship, Renner took subsequent young dancers under her wing to mentor. As fellows, the dancers pay no tuition. They take class daily and are sometimes chosen to dance roles in the professional company. They use the fellowship year to decide if they will pursue a professional career. Some Butler Fellowship dancers grow, mature and move to other companies, but the Butlers remain equally proud of them because they are raising the level of the art form.

Providing Risk Capital for Future Dancers

“For years the Butlers have dedicated much of their philanthropic energy to the final, most expensive stages of an aspiring artist’s preparation,” Ruiz says. “They provide ‘risk capital’ as an investment in what might be . . . knowing there are no guarantees, but also knowing that these young people need a chance to keep going.” In her view, many artistic voices are never heard or fully realized, because when the time comes for an artist to leave behind ‘plan B’ and truly focus on their potential for a professional career with their full attention, financial challenges rob them all of possibility. “The Butlers understand this and invest deeply in this critically important part of the creative ecosystem,” Ruiz says. “There are already dance artists who will forever know that, without the Butlers, there would have been no next step in their careers.”

As a board member and donor, Sarah states that she has been impressed by the leadership of Ballet Austin’s innovative business team. For example, many of the dancers and administrative staff members are young professionals just starting their families and struggling with their work-life balance. Rather than losing their contributions and having to train new hires, Ballet Austin management allows new

parents to bring their infants to work for the first year of life. Recognizing that dance careers do not last a lifetime, the Butlers note the degree and continuing education programs at Austin's St. Edward's University where many Ballet Austin dancers take college courses to prepare for their post-dance career. The company offers 401(k) plans for the staff and dancers, plus excellent health insurance and physical care, including chiropractic, understanding the importance of caring for the whole person. "Those two things are so important to us," Sarah says. "The ballet staff is supported and the dancers are brought into knowledge that a bigger life is out there. Dancers are also athletes and their bodies can't perform at this level forever."

Speaking of the whole person, the Butlers are impressed by all the programs the ballet makes available to the general public, such as Pilates classes for mothers and children and breast cancer survivors in the state-of-the-art training facility inside Ballet Austin's Butler Dance Education Center. Sarah herself has been taking Pilates for ten years and at one point she took Pilates ballet. "We are proud of these programs! Our name's on the building," Sarah exclaims. Ernest gets plenty of exercise, too, in the couple's backyard swimming pool, where they both also get a workout taking care of the pool by themselves. They also enjoy spending time with their children, Robert and Linda, and their grandchildren.

The Butler's ongoing commitment to Ballet Austin has brought them — and their community — much joy. They feel the center has not yet reached its peak and there is a great future in store. Sarah agrees with what company artistic director Mills has said: while contemporary dance is the future, dancers need to build on the classical training they receive. Sarah observes: "You see the dancers motioning with their hands, following what Stephen is telling them, and then their bodies produce the right steps."

As for their own futures, the Butlers will continue to travel. Ernest smiles and says that they have been in 142 countries and visited every continent. "It's cold in Antarctica," Sarah says. Soon after this interview, they were heading for their 143rd country, Kuwait. On those trips they have been totally rewarded, seeing dance all over the globe.

Sarah and Ernest agree that there are many hardships in the world, but maintain that it is important to support arts organizations. They've learned that sometimes dance is last in line for funding, "Yet," Sarah says, "it is so beautiful." Summing up the impact of this exceptional couple, Ruiz adds, "Some people say that 'nearly everything I needed to know in life I learned in kindergarten.' I say nearly everything I needed to know I learned from the Butlers."

Forrest Preece is an Austin native who has been a member of the Ballet Austin board for 16 years. For more than 39 years he worked in the advertising business, running his own agency for 28 years before retiring in 2005. He also serves on the board of the Austin Convention and Visitors Bureau. He and his wife Linda Ball support a number of arts and health-related causes in Austin and they are on the Director's Council of the Butler School of Music at the University of Texas. Since 2001, he has written a personalities column for West Austin News.

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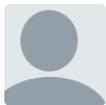
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