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Photo: Will Robinson

Dancewear On Broad Calls on Community to Stay Afloat

The coronavirus pandemic has delivered a devastating blow to the Philadelphia arts community, including dance companies and the businesses that service them. Dancers Julia Higdon and Will Robinson are determined that their store, Dancewear On Broad, will not become yet another COVID casualty.

Higdon and Robinson met when she was a senior in high school and he was a student at University of the Arts. He would drop in on Saturday classes at the Rock School, which she attended. They lost touch for more than a decade, reconnected as friends about seven years ago, and have been partners for the past five years.

Higdon studied at the Kirov Academy of Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, and the University of the Arts. A multidisciplinary artist and teacher, Robinson studied classical ballet and modern dance at The Dance Institute of Washington. They have both worked with Brian Sanders' JUNK, Cardell Dance Theatre, and Jumatatu Poe. Robinson is currently working with a group of Philly-based dancers led by Shannon Murphy. To bring in additional income, he moonlights as a bike messenger.

Higdon and Robinson have been business partners since they took over Dancewear on Broad in 2018, when the previous owners were ready to close shop after 17 years. Higdon, who was store manager at the time, decided to work to keep the store open. Since then, Higdon said, the store has grown from serving more than 50 local dance schools, institutions, universities, and companies to nearly 100, not only in Philadelphia but across the country and worldwide.

Fast forward to 2020. The pandemic has robbed so many of livelihoods and loved ones. Higdon and Robinson faced losing the lease to their retail space and apartment, both in the same building on South Broad Street. While Higdon said they have turned a corner, they are not out of the woods yet; they still have outstanding bills for inventory they ordered.

In an effort to keep the store open while they await possible COVID financial relief from the government, Higdon started a GoFundMe

page. To date, it has raised more than $5,000 of its $12,000 goal, which includes:

- $6,000 to secure the store location
- $4,000 for inventory and marketing to help expand the store's online presence
- $2,000 for security deposit to the commercial space's landlord

The owners are promoting their efforts on the store's website. A banner on the home page announces an up to 30 percent off fundraising sale ending Feb. 20. They also are applying for available business loans.

Higdon and Robinson say on their GoFundMe page: "In a time of so much uncertainty, some things are certain: The arts, small businesses, minorities, and education communities have all been deeply impacted and devastated during this pandemic. This is an opportunity for YOU to make a difference. We need your help not only to survive, but to thrive. Diversity in art and culture enriches lives, enriches whole communities. … Your donations will not only go to directly supporting two artists and our female-led, minority-owned small business."

The GoFundMe page describes Dancewear on Broad as the last store in the area for professional and pre-professional dancers. Higdon and Robinson explained that the closest store to Center City is in Drexel Hill, about 25 minutes away. "A lot of customers don't have the means to travel, especially during the pandemic," he said.

Both Higdon and Robinson said the Philly dance community has been very supportive during their store's struggles. "The second we let people know we were in trouble, we had a huge response," Robinson said. Higdon said many people made donations and in-store purchases. "The support was not just one-dimensional. It was a big response. It meant a lot. It reminded us what an amazing community we're in and how we're a part of it."

Dancewear On Broad, 1129 S. Broad St., Philadelphia.

By Darcy Grabenstein
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