

Wednesday, Oct 2, 2019

## Millennial influence grows at Rochester City Ballet

By: Nicole Sheldon    April 12, 2019

Rochester City Ballet has been around for 32 years, and it remains a vibrant and youthful organization defined by innovation with a board of directors spanning multiple generations.



Rochester City Ballet board members, from left, Kate Phelps, Stephanie Rynkowski, Jeffrey League, Ashley Campbell and Amanda Gala.

Of the 17 board members, six are millennials. Pew Research Center defines millennials as those born between 1981 and 1996, making them the youngest 23 and the oldest 38. One in three workers in America is classified as millennials, making them the largest generation in the workforce today.

As millennials are working their way up the chain in their careers and pervading the business world, they bring fresh ideas and strategies to the table. RCB has a loyal audience but aims to extend its reach to other generations, especially younger ones.

Who better to help attract the targeted generation than the millennials on the organization's board?

Stephanie Rynkowski, 35 and a clinical research associate at Bausch and Lomb, joined the ballet's board in September 2018. Her two young daughters dance at Draper Center, the official training school for Rochester City Ballet that was founded by Timothy Draper in 1986. He also founded RCB a year later.

When Rynkowski was approached with the opportunity to join the ballet's board, she believed the position was a good fit since she offered a unique perspective as a mother of dancers who spends a lot of time volunteering for productions and working behind the scenes.

"I thought that bringing the experience I have as a mom to two dancers to the board would be helpful in bringing the ballet into newer times," says Rynkowski. "I've brought ideas and visions that I feel would be helpful in moving the ballet forward, and it might not have always been the most popular opinion in the room, but it's important to look at different age ranges when it comes to the arts. What one generation really likes might not be what the current generation is looking for."

Ashley Campbell, 31 and manager of user security and data integrity at the University of Rochester, agrees with Rynkowski. Though ideas may initially be turned down, she says that the millennial generation recognizes the importance of re-strategizing, regrouping and moving forward.

"Keep pressing to get your 'yes,'" she says. "Socially, we have this belief that if someone is older they're trustworthy. But just because someone has more experience doesn't necessarily mean they know more or are better than you."

Campbell has been sitting on the board for eight months and is a dancer herself. She owns her own studio, Afrikana: Dance Prep Academy, which she opened in 2014. As the only African-American board member on the Rochester City Ballet—and a female African-American at that—she recognizes the vitality of her position.

"I have to speak up; I can't be quiet," says Campbell. "Like any work environment where you may be the only one or there are only a few like you, you still have to be a part of the group but not lose your identity in the process."



RCB board member  
Ashley Campbell

Campbell's studio teaches various forms of dance including afro beats, mod tap, but she ensures that her students have a strong basis in classical ballet her studio and on the board of the ballet, Campbell strives to dispel the myth ballet is only for white dancers.

"We're living in the times where we have Misty Copeland and all these beautiful dancers of color unearthing," she says. "They've always been there, but we paid attention to them."

Rynkowski refers to the ballet as one of Rochester's hidden gems—many city know about it, but not all have checked out RCB for themselves. The troupe classical works such as "The Nutcracker" as well as contemporary pieces that to attract younger audiences.

Rynkowski and fellow millennials on the RCB board appreciate the institutional knowledge that baby boomers and older generations bring to the organization.

"Older generations are more ingrained in the community and have more connections and more of the historical perspective on what's worked and what hasn't," says Jeffrey League, 31, associate at Nixon Peabody. "They're used to lean on and I think it complements well with younger generations. Our board is diverse in both age and experience and I think that enhances our abilities to effectively increase exposure."

League moved to Rochester from Cleveland two years ago. He joined the Rochester City Ballet board at the beginning of this year, noting that he has always had a passion for the performing arts and felt this was a way for him to plug into the local community as an emerging leader.

Though the ballet's board is infused with multiple generations, the leaders all value collaboration and are focused on attaining the goals of the organization.



Shannon Ealy

"I think we all recognize that some of the longstanding organizations need to be evolving to remain relevant and financially solvent," says Shannon Ealy, manager of marketing and engagement at the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce. "The millennial generation is jumping in and we're willing to get our hands dirty along the way."

Ealy joined the board in August 2018 after hearing through a friend that the organization was looking for someone to spearhead the masquerade, which is the ballet geared toward young professionals.

She acknowledges that a new generation permeating the board brings understandable friction between the way things have always been done and the introduction of new processes and ideas.

"I think friction is natural, but not necessarily a bad thing," says Ealy. "From that friction comes the best possible scenario. I get to learn from older board members' incredible institutional knowledge as well as bring cutting-edge ideas in terms of technology because people are living another life online and these organizations have to adapt to that, too."

The Rochester City Ballet's board of directors are on the same page collectively when it comes to their mission to enhance RCB's visibility in Rochester and grow its viewership. Bringing millennials on board to offer innovative strategies for achieving their mission reflects the board's commitment to reaching younger audiences.

"I really want the ballet to be alive in Rochester," says Ealy. "That's something that's shared among all the board members. We're all excited about our possibilities."

*nsheldon@bridgetowermedia.com / (585) 363-7031*

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE



Finger Lakes  
Community College  
earns more federal  
support for science



October 2, 2019



Several key decisions  
should precede  
retirement, advisers  
say



October 2, 2019



Amidst record  
growth, leadership  
baton is passed at  
Partners + Napier



October 1, 2019

