Kristen Avansino ’16 (honorary doctor of humane letters)

The Journey

BEGINNING

My 46-year love affair with the University of Nevada, Reno ignited when I was hired as a professor to create an academic dance program. Yes, I had studied every form of dance imaginable, including classical ballet, jazz, Afro-Haitian and ballroom, but modern dance, specifically the Martha Graham technique, captivated me. To pursue the modern dance genre, I earned my bachelor of arts and master of arts degrees in dance at Mills College in California. I created dance programs in San Francisco and Las Vegas, but my dream was always to teach the Martha Graham curriculum in a university setting.

As the old adage says, “Be careful what you ask for.” In 1971, the University of Nevada, Reno gave me the opportunity to fulfill my passion.

My first teaching station was located in the North Virginia Gym (known as the New Gym in the ’60s; later lovingly called the Old Gym). There I shared space with Coaches Chris Ault ’69 (physical education), ’73 M.Ed., John Legarza ’58 (history), ’63 M.Ed., and Jack Cook. Student devotees of dance totaled thirty; the less than perfect musical accompaniment consisted of my portable phonograph. However, as the dance program grew, I became the transient professor, record player in hand, at various campus locales (including the gym basement). Dance concerts featuring choreography by both students and professors were held in the gym or at the Masonic Theatre on First Street. The dance program was a “diamond in the rough” featuring tough, competitive standards, unabashed student commitment, and joyful camaraderie.

DEVELOPMENT

In 1973, the entire faculty of the physical education and dance department was jubilant as we were moved to the new Lombardi Center. As the first non-smoking building in Nevada, dance had bona fide studios on the second floor. Dancers, non-dancers and athletes alike enrolled; body conditioning classes included the Nautilus equipment placed alongside the new swimming pool. The epitome of this cross-enthusiasm was my highly acclaimed dance class for the track team, purportedly the first such class offering in the United States.

In 1981 I moved on to tackle the business of philanthropy at the E. L. Wiegand Foundation knowing that dance was alive and thriving at UNR.

BE PATIENT

During my early years at UNR I desperately envisioned a united arts curriculum, magically “governed” by a school of arts. My efforts evaporated as the advocate-in-residence, Dean Rebecca Stoddard, relocated to an eastern university. However, today the dance program is an important part of the School of the Arts under the leadership of President Marc Johnson, and boasts a major in dance with almost 900 students enrolled per semester! My dream has come true.
DO NOT REST ON YOUR LAURELS

I returned to UNR 17 years ago as an adjunct professor of dance. Honestly, it was a very scary proposition. The risk associated with becoming a choreographer and lecturer was not only daunting but challenging. After mentally agonizing for several weeks I realized I could NOT reject the honor. Over the years, my dances have become more athletic, thematically complex, and theatrical. I have pushed myself into unknown territories, practicing a “nothing ventured, nothing gained” philosophy. Positive risk taking has also seeped into the execution of the E. L. Wiegand Foundation’s mission: pose the creative “why not” questions, force applicants to consider the execution of a “dream goal” or become the catalyst for change. Case in point: the intersection of North Virginia Street and Lawlor Events Center. Why not create an extraordinary sense of arrival on campus and complete the circle with the Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center and the Joe Crowley Student Union? Why not support every student’s well-being and fitness in a state-of-the-art environment?

The 149,000-square-foot E. L. Wiegand Fitness Center is the perfect example of the notion that has become a reality for our entire student body.

BLENDED CAREERS

Every day I am grateful for the opportunity to use my creative talent and my analytical abilities in my responsibilities as an adjunct professor of dance and as the president and executive director of the E. L. Wiegand Foundation. Seemingly unrelated, my professorship and my responsibilities as a foundation president are intertwined; one can use both skill sets in both professional arenas. For example, the mechanics of creating a dance course curriculum is similar to building a mission-driven philanthropic agenda, and the creative process inherent in building choreography is not unlike visionary grant-making.

NEVER A DUMB QUESTION, NEVER TOO SMALL A DETAIL

My long relationship with UNR students has transformed personal reticence and self-doubt. As an artistic mentor and dance jock, the challenges of the creative process present unique opportunities to learn together. We learn to remain curious, to ask questions, and address details. The goal is to work hard to do well … very well.

THE FUTURE

The University of Nevada, Reno has matured into a nationally recognized institution thriving in its gorgeous surroundings and more than 21,000 students strong. Reno is a university town, and I look forward to dancing and teaching in the future!