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The Joy of Dance:
Hannah Paddock and
the Sebastopol Ballet



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YOUTH SPORTS**

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The Joy of Dance: Hannah Paddock and the Sebastopol Ballet



Hannah welcomes all to her school.

BY CATHERINE HUGHES

PHOTOS BY SHEILA JOHNSON, STUDIO J PHOTOGRAPHY

On a weekday afternoon in Sebastopol, as Gravenstein Highway South fills with parents taxiing their children to after-school activities, a small plaza comes alive with unusual energy. Children arrive at a modest storefront tucked between other businesses, their bodies electric with anticipation, ballet slippers stuffed into backpacks alongside homework and snacks. Inside Sebastopol Ballet, owner Hannah Paddock adjusts the volume on a digital playlist as the studio hums with preparation—not for stardom or perfection, but for something more important to Hannah: the simple joy of dance.

"I love that ballet offers a nice balance of everything," says Paddock, her posture betraying decades of training even as she casually leans against the barre. "It can be different from class to class depending on the combination you're dancing, which keeps it fresh."

Sebastopol Ballet has a rhythm all its own, one that echoes through students' laughter, shared moments of triumph when a difficult step is mastered, and the carefully chosen notes of digital classical music. With over thirty years of history, the studio remains a cornerstone of West County, offering a welcoming space for people of all ages to experience the beauty of ballet without the pressure of perfection. As Hannah explains, "Currently we have around 200 students in our programs. While we're known for ballet, we also have a thriving contemporary program. Some students come specifically for our contemporary classes. Our community spans a wide age range, from 3-year-olds to adults in their 70s, including some trying dance for the first time. We're particularly proud of welcoming back dancers who have returned to ballet after years away from it."

Founded in 1991 by Susan Borgeson, Lois Hartman, and Paula Martens, Sebastopol Ballet School began at the Sebastopol Community Center, quickly becoming a cherished part of West County. In 2011, it moved to its current location and continued to thrive. Paula retired from teaching ballet in 2016, and Hannah Paddock and Susan's daughter, Lily Borgeson, stepped in to carry on her legacy. For a time, the school was co-owned by four partners with the understanding that Susan and Lois would eventually step away. Lois later retired, and Susan transitioned to a semi-retired role, still sharing her passion for dance through her beloved Adult Ballet classes.

Now, Sebastopol Ballet is wholly owned and directed by Hannah Paddock. She began ballet lessons at Santa Rosa Ballet in 1998 to complement her skills as a competitive gymnast. Her first Nutcracker performance began a deep connection to ballet that would shape her future in ways she couldn't yet imagine. After Santa Rosa Ballet closed, she continued her training at Sebastopol Ballet School, eventually transitioning from student to teacher, partner, and now director.

Hannah's love for ballet was nurtured by her mother, Mary, who made a cherished tradition of taking her to see San Francisco Ballet's Nutcracker each holiday season. They would stay in a boutique hotel, dress up for an elegant dinner, and then revel in the magic of the performances. The grand Sugar Plum Fairy captivated Hannah's imagination. "I remember sitting on the edge of my seat, completely enchanted," she recalls. "I had the joy of seeing principal dancer Yuan Yuan Tan as the Sugar Plum Fairy several times — she danced with the company for 29 seasons and was always incredible!"

While she never saw herself as a choreographer in the past, teaching has gradually shifted her perspective. "As I get older, I'm enjoying that aspect of teaching more and more. It's fulfilling to watch the dancers interpret movement in their own way," she says proudly.

Sebastopol Ballet's welcoming neighborhood feel aligns seamlessly with the local values of a community known for its dynamic arts scene. Hannah acknowledges that most students aren't training for professional careers. "We're very much an after-school program. It's a home for them to come and dance without stress. I remind myself of that often — it's about enjoying ballet, not having a 180-degree turnout or your leg to your eyeball."

Still, the echoes of her own competitive experiences remain. "I attended professional auditions where we'd do a plié, and then there'd be a round of cuts." Hannah sighs. "There were times I cried in my car afterward. Eventually, I realized that life wasn't for me. I'm happy teaching and creating a space where the dancers support each other."

Much of the studio's funding comes from its annual Nutcracker performance, a beloved local tradition that doubles as a primary fundraiser. Parent boosters,



Inside Sebastopol Ballet School.

local donors, and raffles — often featuring wine from nearby vineyards — provide crucial support. "The Nutcracker really carries us through the year and helps provide scholarships for students who need them," Hannah says. The production is a community event, with parents and volunteers dedicating countless hours to bring the classic tale to life, a microcosm of how small arts organizations survive through collective effort.

Costumes are another labor of love. "Sue and I do a lot of them ourselves. We have a few moms who sew, but most are done in-house. Our Spanish chocolate costumes took me over 20 hours each. There's so much hand-sewing and fitting involved." Lois Hartman's legacy, a talented costume maker, lives on through these intricate creations. Still, for Hannah, the tutu remains the ultimate ballet costume.

When it comes to class music, modern convenience has replaced traditional live accompaniment. "We don't have a pianist — it's all digital. I use Spotify because there are so many class albums available. Back when I started teaching, it was all CDs. Now I'm grateful not to lug around a heavy CD case."

Despite its longstanding presence, Sebastopol Ballet remains a hidden gem. "It's surprising how many people don't know we're here. We've been part of the community for over 30 years." The studio's website is the primary point of contact, especially as they gear up for recitals and the summer session. In an era of diminishing arts education, the studio's persistence feels like a quiet act of resistance.



Sebastopol Ballet dancers preparing for Spring recital.

Reflecting on the future, Hannah is committed to maintaining and expanding the legacy that Sue, Lois, and Paula built. "I want to continue offering a space where dancers can grow in confidence and artistry. Ballet teaches discipline, grace, and resilience, but most importantly, it brings joy. Classes run from September to June, with placement based on age and ability," she explains.

"While we welcome everyone, most classes preparing for the June recital aren't accepting new students mid-year. However, adults and preschoolers can join anytime, and we offer a summer session in July."

Sebastopol Ballet is part of the invisible infrastructure that keeps small-town arts alive. Hannah, a dedicated owner, is always on the go. Even before our interview is complete, she is already mentally preparing for tomorrow's classes and dancers, all part of the ongoing performance of Sebastopol Ballet.

To find out more about Sebastopol Ballet, visit their website at SebastopolBallet.com.



Hannah at 5 years ready to dance.

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Sebastopol Ballet is one of the longest running dance studios in Sonoma County.

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