



ELIZABETH SAGARIN

Elsa Posey, 86, has inspired generations of young people in Northport, and elsewhere, for more than 70 years. Here, she works in her Northport studio with student Valerie Sperber.

Ms. Posey dances on

As a girl, she founded a local school, but her dance advocacy has reached a wider audience

BY LIZA N. BURBY
Special to Newsday

Elsa Posey has been called a legend, a leader in the world of dance education and — to generations of young dancers — simply Ms. Posey.

And on July 25, she added a new superlative to her resume. Her school, Posey School of

Dance, which she founded when she was 14, was recognized by the Northport Historical Society as the oldest woman-owned business in the harborside village. She received its Icon Award, which honors those who played a significant role in shaping the village.

“I don’t think you could talk to anyone here who doesn’t know Elsa or hasn’t been impressed by what she’s done

with her students. She’s really part of the fabric here,” said trustee Dennis Tannenbaum, 75, who Posey said became her 13th landlord at 57 Main St. in 1999.

In addition to her work on Long Island, Posey, 86, is also respected as an international scholar of dance, its history and its pedagogy, specializing in dance for young children and classical ballet. She’s recog-

nized for her advocacy in making dance part of arts education. And she’s trained hundreds of dancers who have gone on to become educators and performers — or just dance lovers.

“The school has been my mother’s life work,” said her eldest son, Theodore Novak, 58, of Northport. “She’s a fixture in the village, but I like to think her contributions are

wider. Yes, she’s been running a local dance school for seven decades, but her main legacy is her educational endeavors on a national level and for numerous organizations, and how she has shared that with the larger community.”

But Posey said none of that was her intention when she started studying ballet in New

See POSEY on E14

She put LI dance 'on the map'

POSEY from E13

York City at age 12. She had earned a scholarship to study with the ballet master George Balanchine, but she said she couldn't afford the train fare.

She said she offered to teach the children of her mother's friends, charging them a dollar each. Then in February 1953, Posey — who had performed at the Northport Veterans Affairs Medical Center with her sister, Jacqueline — was invited by the hospital's director of music, Joseph Sciarrino, to teach at his music school in Northport Village on Scudder Avenue.

"It was better than babysitting," she said. "I didn't consider myself a teacher. I was just running around with the kids and having fun. My sister taught tap and jazz with me."

A VAUDEVILLIAN TEACHER

Meanwhile, it became clear to her that, as a student, she had a lot of learning to do. "I got to New York and found out that I wasn't the greatest dancer I thought I was," she said. "I had been taught the wrong way. My mother had found a teacher from vaudeville, so what I learned were routines. I never really learned technique from the ground up, so I had to start from the beginning."

That realization would be the first step toward her dedication to making sure other young dancers had proper training. "Back then dance classes were considered a frivolous activity, mainly intended to instill social graces in young girls," Posey said. "I wanted to make sure that when I taught children, they wouldn't be harmed and that they wouldn't learn the wrong things, so they'd be able to go further."

In 1954, when Sciarrino had to move, Posey took her school around the corner to Union Place.

"It was the rear of Mr. Louis Ostuni's barber shop," she recalled. "He agreed to rent the space for \$50 monthly. Since we were under 18, he did so without a lease. He said that if we paid the rent on time, we'd be welcome. It was a good start to learning how to run a business."



Elsa Posey oversees an advanced ballet class at Posey School of Dance in Northport.

A photo of Elsa Posey as a young ballerina hangs in the waiting room of the Posey School of Dance in Northport.



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A ceremony in which Elsa Posey received an Icon Award for her role in shaping Northport Village was celebrated with dance, naturally.

JEFF BACHNER

MAIN STREET AND BEYOND

Posey, whose sister was still teaching with her then, was attracting so many students that in 1956, the year she graduated high school, she said she needed to move to a larger space at 57 Main St. She's been there ever since.

Her rent for just the top floor, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and wooden dance floor, was \$75 a month. For a time the second-floor tenant

was abstract painter Stanley Twardowicz, who often hosted his friend, novelist Jack Kerouac, who lived in Northport. When Twardowicz moved out, she rented his space for a second studio.

Meanwhile, Posey said, she was intent on becoming a professional dancer. She attended classes in Manhattan and taught her students on the afternoons she wasn't dancing. After she graduated high

school, Posey and her sister (who died in 1971) moved into a one-room apartment in the city. Posey said she studied with the American Ballet Theatre and every weekend commuted to Northport to teach. That ended in 1960 when she married.

"In 1960, you couldn't be married and be a dancer. I dedicated myself to teaching dance because I realized that I enjoyed teaching more than

performing," she said.

Her first mission was to offer a complete education in dance. "I recognized quite early what dance had done for me — my ability to organize, self-discipline — and I didn't understand why every child didn't have that chance," she said. "From the beginning, I wasn't interested in teaching children to perform, but in helping them incorporate dance as a part of their lives."



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Elsa Posey and Christina Vanophemert, a former student and now a teacher at the school, observe an advanced ballet class at the studio on Main Street in Northport.

Terry Reid, executive director of the Northport Historical Society, presented the Northport Icon Award to Posey in recognition of her seven decades as a village businesswoman.

Posey said she turned her business into a nonprofit and produced performances in local public schools that promoted dance education. By the late 1960s and into the early '70s, she said her school had an enrollment of 750 to 900 and additional studios in Smithtown, Huntington, St. James and Cold Spring Harbor. Classes included ballet, tap, jazz, modern and folk dance. Posey was among the first

to hold performances of the "Nutcracker" ballet on Long Island, starting in 1970, she said. She also formed the Long Island Ballet (which disbanded in 1980) to bring in more professional dancers and produce several shows through the Huntington and New York State arts councils.

THE NATIONAL STAGE

Posey said her school has always been focused on dance

education rather than recitals and competitions, which are the main financial support of many Long Island dance schools. She acknowledges that has been challenging for her bottom line. But with her mission in mind, in the 1980s she closed all but the Northport school and increased her focus on national advocacy.

She joined national organizations to learn dance history, notation and therapy so she

could bring that back to her students. In 1988, Posey said she joined the board of directors for the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, where she successfully advocated to have "dance" included in the group's mission. (The group, now known as SHAPE America, is based in Maryland.)

And in 1998, Posey said she helped found the National Dance Education Organization to support dance teachers nationwide.

"I spent 30 years researching issues involving dance schools in the private sector and the dance educators who worked at these schools," she said.

Another mission has been to prevent injuries among young dancers. Posey said she worked for several years with the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science developing white papers and meeting with doctors and scientists to determine professional practice in dance education. She's also been a prolific writer about these causes for dance magazines.

"It's important that people understand not only the content of dance, but dance medicine, anatomy and pedagogy," said National Dance Education Organization executive director Susan McGreevy-Nichols, 72, of Silver Spring, Maryland. "So you no longer have the ballet mistresses banging a stick on the floor or whacking dancers in the back of their leg, when people did things that weren't good for their students. Elsa definitely understood this."

"She gave up her time and she donated large amounts of cash to keep us going," McGreevy-Nichols added. "She's an incredible, important part of the community. And she has put dance on the map for Long Island."

STUDENT ADMIRATION

Former students speak about Posey with affection and admiration. Amy Connor, 63, of Northport, who had a musical theater career for 16 years, including as a cast member of "Oh! Calcutta!" on Broadway, said she commuted from Port Jefferson to Posey's after school daily starting at age 12. She also participated in Posey's children's dance company, created so students could get performance experience.

"I credit the training that I got from Elsa as the reason that I had a pretty much injury-free career," Connor said.

"Her training prepared me well for a long professional career. When I moved to Northport after I got married, I started taking class again at Posey's. I still dance, and I credit that to Elsa because I'm not in pain."

Connor, a director and choreographer who runs the drama program at Mount Sinai High School, added, "She taught all her students that you may not be going into dance professionally, but you can always keep it in your life."

Another former student, Cynthia Sheppard, 64, said she started training with Posey "when I was still in diapers until I was 14."

"Posey School of Dance was like a second family for me. The value of studying with Elsa for all that time is that I was in such good shape," said Sheppard, a real estate agent in Centereach. "I don't think you can beat ballet for exercise, and it opens up a different part of your mind . . . I'm still grateful to Elsa for teaching me how to be so creative and dance."

'SHE'S JUST ICONIC'

Posey said she'll keep teaching as long as she can make it up the 35 steps to her third-floor studio. She still oversees the teen ballet classes with her former student, Christina Vanophemert, 28, of Kings Park. Vanophemert, who started taking classes with Posey when she was 5 and began teaching there in 2018, said the experience is poignant for her.

"It honestly feels like I'm working with a real-life legend. For instance, I teach Pilates classes — and Elsa studied with Joseph Pilates. She's just iconic," she said. "Sometimes when I'm teaching, I'll say something and realize it's what Ms. Posey taught me 20 years ago."

Posey said she still dances every morning, going through a barre routine. "If not for dance, I wouldn't be able to move. It's important to keep moving, even when the doctors say you can't. If you're still alive and you can still flick a finger, you can still move, still keep going."

While she continues to fundraise for her school, Posey allows she might finally retire if she can sell it to someone who shares her philosophy of dance education. "If somebody wants a good dance school, they should come forward."