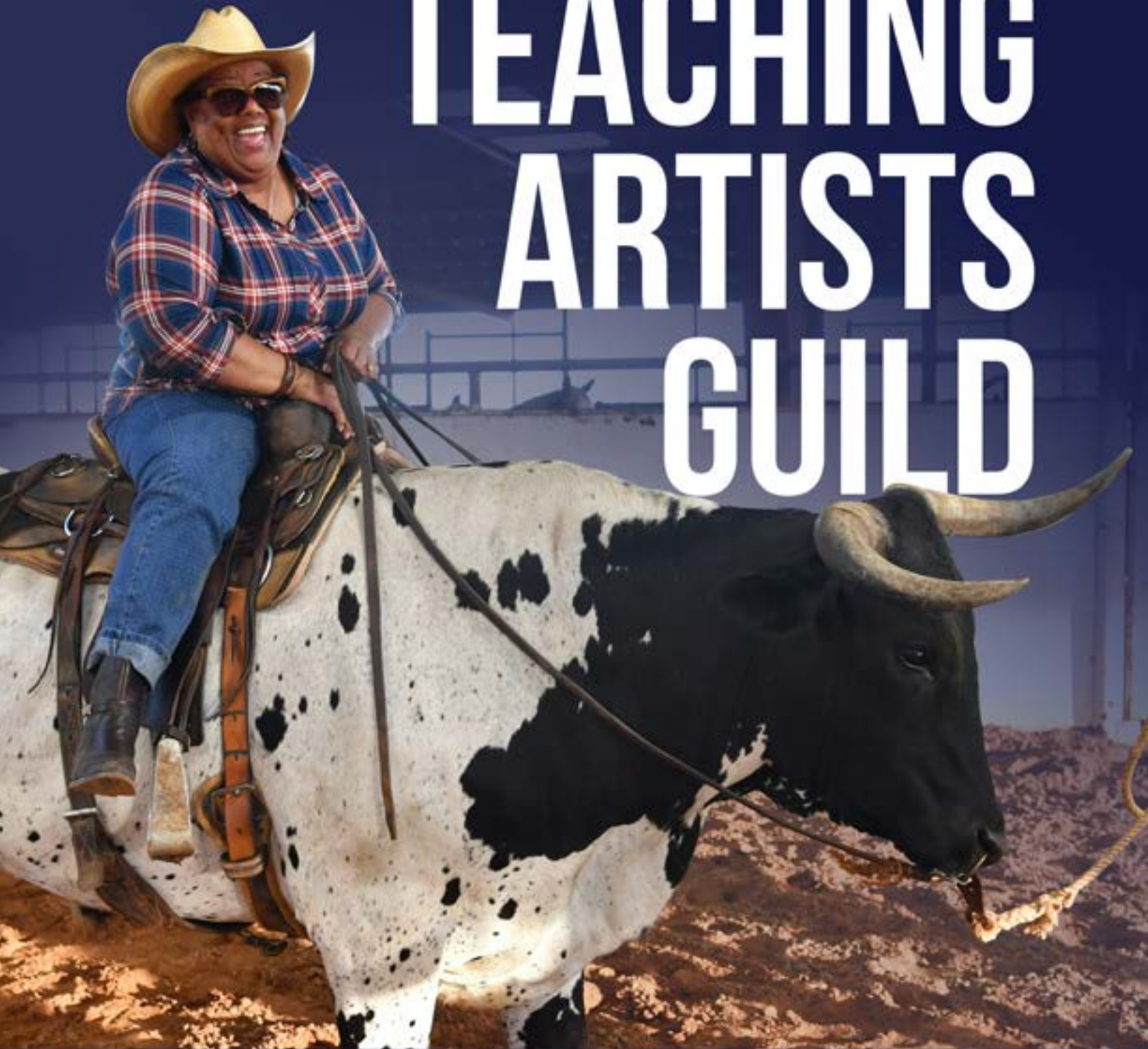


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TEACHING ARTISTS GUILD



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EMPLOYING TEACHING ARTISTS:

Luna Dance Institute Strives to Professionalize the Field

by Cherie Hill



As California arts providers prepare to shift teaching artists' hiring status from independent contractors to employees, an opportunity for the arts education field to reevaluate how teaching artists make a sustainable living unfolds. The passing of CA Assembly Bill 5 provides more clarity and new rules around what classifies a worker as an independent contractor or an employee, affecting numerous teaching artists and arts education organizations. Though this one-size-fits-all legislation poses innumerable problems within the arts industry, the bill evokes essential conversations around teaching artists' jobs and security.

I work as an employed Dance Teaching Artist and Director of Community & Culture at Luna Dance Institute (LDI), a nonprofit dance education organization based in Berkeley, CA. My first teaching experience began teaching dance in public schools as an undergraduate student with mentorship through ArtsBridge. Upon graduation, I joined the gig economy as an independent contractor working for two organizations. To supplement my income when no teaching residencies were available, I worked part-time at a call center for a women's clothing company. After two years of multi-job juggling, I quit and enrolled in graduate school. Subsequent to completing an MFA in Dance; I felt lucky to land a job at LDI. As a teacher-administrator, I teach dance in underserved communities, earn a stable income with benefits, and have time to pursue my choreography.

Luna Dance Institute's mission is to bring creativity, equity, and community to every child's life through the art of dance. We bring dance to more than 20,000 children and 300 artists, teachers, and social service providers annually. Founded in 1992, LDI has grown from a local children's dance program to a nationally recognized dance education organization that develops future choreographers, leaders,

[1] Johnstone, Jean, "Making Teaching Artists Employees", TAG Quarterly, Fall 2019

and visionaries. In building the organization, founding members spent significant time discussing the mission and values, and how an equitable business structure could align.

When LDI became a nonprofit, the director's instituted a unique model where they hire teaching artists to work as both an educator and administrator. This decision stemmed partly from inequities observed within the field where administrators possess greater access to employee benefits and steady wages than teaching artists. Over time, LDI leaders built their business to offer teaching artists full-time work in addition to employee benefits. Today, the organization's mission, pedagogical values, and job stability, attracts teaching artists from around the nation.

Luna's Co-Executive Directors Patricia Reedy (founder) and Nancy Ng have worked together for more than two decades to evolve the organization and the business infrastructure. In a 2015 blog, Ng explains how the teacher-administrator model manifests:

"Teaching artist leaders are running arts organizations and developing new business models while teaching and creating art. Luna has recognized this since inception. My colleague, Patricia Reedy, founded Luna 23 years ago as a teaching artist. And although it has sometimes been a struggle, I am proud that we offer our teaching artist-administrators full-time employment, health benefits, paid time off, professional development opportunities, and a retirement plan. We are able to give teaching artists a healthy and sane structure for employment. A full-time employee at Luna teaches an equivalent of 10-12 classes per week, with the remainder of her time assisting, coordinating, or managing a program or resource area."²

Employing teaching artists aligns with Luna's values to uplift and professionalize the field. The organization's nationally recognized professional learning program provides training and support for teaching artists and all who teach dance. LDI's leadership is committed to investing in their teaching artists and to impacting the entire profession, helping "teaching professionals remember their passion, to see their careers as bigger than they originally dreamed, and to stay courageous and creative..."³



Photo: Patricia Reedy leads LDI teaching artists in professional development training. Photo by Kreate Photography

Creating a new business model comes with complications. When asked what one of the most significant challenges has been, Reedy explains that in her day, dance teaching artists lived with hula

[2]<https://blog.americansforthearts.org/2019/05/15/teaching-artists-applying-the-breadth-of-their-skills>

[3] Organizational Profile (Nello), Luna Dance Institute, updated 2017

hoops in the back of their car, and, when laid off in the summer, were forced to find lower-paying gigs. In forming LDI, she wanted to create a situation where teaching artists could depend on their income and eventually have benefits & paid time off. She noticed other types of jobs that artists were pursuing to sustain their career. These professions included publicity and marketing, program planning, and administration.



Patricia Reedy explains a dance concept to LDI teaching artists. Photo by Kreate Photography.

Through their own experience as teaching artists, Reedy and Ng knew that teaching twenty-five classes a week was not sustainable if their employees were going to stay in and evolve the field. Instead, they experimented with a formula that made sense for both the artist and organization, to balance the teaching and administrative work. Reedy realizes that completing dual roles is not for everybody. "Some teaching artists want more flexibility, enjoy free-lance work, or do not want to do

administrative work. I began to realize the model we were looking at was not exactly a dancer-teacher-administrator life, but it resembled a choreographer's life." The role of a choreographer requires creating a dance from almost nothing. A dance-maker must edit and revise their art, take risks, and work to convey their pieces' intention and meaning. The skills of a choreographer are similar to those needed to run a nonprofit organization.

Currently, the majority of teaching artists employed at Luna are choreographers. Moving into 28 years, LDI leaders are focusing on three significant goals: leadership development, the purchase of a permanent facility, and forming a nationally recognized Dance Creativity Teaching & Research Institute. In this stage of expansion, Reedy and Ng are experimenting with diversifying their employee structure by hiring employees who do not teach to run the operational side of things, shifting teaching artists' administrative duties more closely with running the programs. In the last year, two part-time administrative employees, who happen to be choreographers, were hired to manage operations and assist with the capital campaign.



Nancy Ng teaches an improvisation and dance fundamentals class for 8-12-year-olds. Photo by Kreate Photography.

For leaders seeking to change their business model and employ teaching artists, Ng and Reedy advise taking time to think deeply about what matters to the organization's mission and core values. "Core values need to be in place and your budget should reflect these values. Identify your financial priorities and how you will raise funds and advocate for the cost of programs to funders" offers Ng. Since employing teaching artists is expensive, organizations should also discuss what they are willing to give up. Most nonprofits operate with a full development team that oversees fundraising and grant writing. At Luna, faculty trains the teaching artists to execute these parts of the job. Reedy states, "our staff has learned how to work in development, but there is a luxury in being just the teaching artist and having others take care of the other parts. Leaders should think about that and what it will mean down the pike."

This February Reedy and Ng offer workshops in strategic planning and evaluation, and advocacy. Learn more at <https://lunadanceinstitute.org/professional-learning/>.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cherie Hill is a Dance Teaching Artist and the Director of Community and Culture at Luna Dance Institute. She has published dance research in Gender Forum and the Sacred Dance Guild Journal and has presented at international conferences including the International Conference on Arts and Humanities, and the National Dance Education Organization Conference. She is President-Elect of the CA Dance Education Association and a National Guild for Community Arts Education Leadership Institute alumna. Cherie directs and performs with IrieDance, a small dance company, where she researches dance, transcendence, and how the body is a vessel for metaphysical presence.



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