



BELEDI BEAT



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Note from Cassandra

Many of you have asked to get to know more about the excellent instructors here at the Cassandra School. It's about time we put some of their stories in the newsletter, so enjoy! Please let us know if there is any other person or thing about which we could give you more information.

Jawaahir is once again sending dancers to the Blossom Festival in Toronto, May 4-5-6, to share a stage with the renowned Egyptian star, Dina!



Blossom Festival 2017 photo by Ken Dobb

Our Remarkable Teachers at The Cassandra School

The Cassandra School is one of America's premier belly dance schools. Founded by Cassandra Shore in 1978 to offer professional-level instruction for belly dance in a dance studio environment, the school has supported dancers at all stages of their development and commitment. Cassandra is known world-wide for her excellence as an instructor, and the school is an embodiment of her knowledge of Arab dance, music, and culture. Taking classes at the Cassandra School can be life-changing, whether you just want to dance and have fun, or be a performer onstage.

Classes at The Cassandra School are currently taught by Cassandra Shore, Kathy McCurdy, Lauren Olson Fraga, Jenny Piper, Angela Skrade, and Renee Szudy. Each woman is a marvelous dancer, wonderful person, and remarkable instructor. Read more about how they inspire students, share their passion for dance, and ensure The Cassandra School is so well-respected.



CSBD logo design by Genevieve Johnson

Cassandra Shore



*Cassandra photo by
Donna Kelly*

Cassandra Shore, artistic director of Jawaahir Dance Company, founded The Cassandra School in 1978 when it became clear that there was a need for more belly dance instruction in the Twin Cities. “I taught in the basement of Georges restaurant where I was a performer, but it wasn’t ideal.” Ever the visionary, Cassandra didn’t just want to do classes, she wanted to establish an eponymous dance school built to achieve a singular goal. “I wanted to make a place where people could do an intensive study of the topic. I wanted to take students to a professional level.”

One could say she’s achieved her goal and then some. Many of her earliest students achieved professional dance status and have even retired. Cassandra’s still going. What keeps it fresh for her? “It’s my life’s path: to be a dancer, teacher, and coach. It’s an evolution and a lifelong commitment.” Cassandra is deeply committed to her students, Jawaahir Dance Company, performing, and choreography. That she is a masterful teacher in addition to all that she does, makes her a legend among other teachers and performers.

Cassandra believes that a long career in dance is possible with care and good instruction. “We train your body with a focus on conditioning and body awareness. The way to become a good dancer is to focus on the basics.” Part of her teaching philosophy

is to introduce Western audiences and students to a non-Western art form. “It’s important to explain and show the stylistic differences in the way Arab dance is done in different Middle Eastern cultures. I talk about the cultural context.”

Education from Cassandra is relevant to dancers at all levels, and especially for beginning students. “It takes time to learn these nuances, to feel the music and relate to it. In the beginning we train people to hear Arab music, and to protect their bodies by having good posture moving to the music.” Cassandra also believes “belly dance has many gifts” like empowerment, relaxation, strength. “In order to get those gifts, good dance technique has to be the focus.”

Kathy McCurdy

Kathy McCurdy sees herself as living proof that even if you don’t feel like you are a born dancer, you can achieve new levels of grace and fluidity by studying it. As a young woman, Kathy always worried that she “looked odd” and clumsy on the dance floor. As a college student in Madison, WI she secretly started taking jazz and ballet classes to address her awkwardness.

Then the day she slipped in to see the Middle Eastern dance class do a noon-time performance released something obstinate within her. “I thought, oh my god, I am so wrong about this dance form. It was so intriguing. The women were graceful and had wonderful control. I loved their feminine costumes, so right then I decided to add Middle Eastern dance to my class schedule.” After a couple years, she moved to Chicago and kept studying with the renowned dancer Dahlena. But the chance to see Cassandra perform at a Turquoise International event changed her life’s path once again.

“It was the first time I saw a dancer who *was* the music. I could see what I was hearing. I didn’t want to take my eyes off Cassandra. A big lightbulb went on.” A year later she moved to the Twin Cities to study with Cassandra. She’s been teaching at The Cassandra School since 1990, and primarily teaches levels 1 through 3. Kathy is the ultimate teacher and the school’s most steadfast instructor besides Cassandra. “I want to share everything I know. I want people to understand Middle Eastern dance is a beautiful and complex art form that can be done by anyone.”

Kathy tends to be very hands on because she was once confounded by dance moves and she likes to explain them well. In her classes she also discusses and demonstrates different rhythms, and points out different instrument sounds in the music to encourage people to keep their ears open to what they are hearing and how it works with the movements. “I like to show where the movement is coming from, or where it’s easier to do in the body. I offer the info that I struggled to learn. It helps people progress more quickly from being beginners because when you advance that’s when it gets really fun.”



Kathy McCurdy photo by Ann Marsden

Lauren Olson Fraga



Lauren Olson Fraga photo by Terra Sura

Lauren Olson Fraga used to play soccer for exercise before a friend introduced her to belly dancing. “I fell in love with the dance and just kept taking classes.” Her first teacher at The Cassandra School was Shari, a then Jawaahir Dance Company member. “She’s such a beautiful dancer and she was inspiring to me. So, I went from the beginning levels and beyond to experience so many other great teachers.”

Lauren now teaches levels 2 herself, and as a Jawaahir Dance Company member and teacher, it feels like she has come full-circle. She knows what it’s like to come to dance late in life and wants people to feel comfortable in her classroom. “My teaching philosophy is to provide a supportive environment for students at different levels.”

Lauren’s first teaching gig, though, was not in the U.S. In 2015, she was living in Brazil with her husband (she was once an exchange student there and speaks Portuguese), and taking classes with Monah Souad. She also danced with Cristina Mendes and taught at her dance school. “Wherever I’ve been I’ve found community in dance.”

Yet she thinks The Cassandra School is special and it was something she missed while she was abroad. “Cassandra’s always had a mission. It’s really rare to find an instructor who is interested in preserving the history and culture of dance and passing on that knowledge in classes, especially to beginners.” As a teacher, Lauren wants to pass on that enrichment, too. “I think belly dance is great for people who like to learn over the course of their lives. It is an art form you can study forever.”

Jenny Piper

Jenny Piper joined Jawaahir Dance Company as a member in 2000 and has been teaching since 2001. As a performer, she is known for her graceful style and buoyant stage presence. She always makes it look effortless and easy, and as a teacher, she is committed to breaking down movements so they are accessible. “I use a lot of imagery and metaphor. I really want students to understand the movement, not just copy me.” Her students get the added benefit of her background in movement and posture as a professional dancer who’s performed both ballet and belly dance.

She started her dance career in ballet at the age of seven. As an adult, women in her circle of friends encouraged each other to take belly dance and signed up together. After her first class she remembers thinking ‘oh yeah, I love this.’ Jenny never set out to be a dance teacher, but when she was asked to sub for another instructor, she found the opportunity exciting. “I love seeing the change in people, when they go from learning a movement to playing with it to make it their own.” Now she teaches mixed levels 3-4 at The Cassandra School.

Jenny describes her way of teaching as both coaching and training. She likes to structure classes by practicing technique as well as giving students the opportunity to try free expression with the movements. Jenny’s classes are always leavened with a little humor too. “My goal is to share my love for these movements. I want my students to feel it and express it, too. I like to engage people in an emotional connection with the dance.”



Jenny Piper photo by Terra Sura

Angela Skrade



Angela Skrade photo by Terra Sura

Angela Skrade is known for both her passionate dance performances and her work as a mehndi artist for her company Ancient Traditions. It was the art of henna that led her to explore belly dancing. “Henna and dancing go hand-in-hand.” Depending on the culture and event, women doing henna for each other would also include music or dance as part of a celebration. “Listening to Arab music while I was doing henna got me thinking of dance. Henna turned out to be a gateway for other things.”

Angela started teaching in 2007 and currently teaches a mixed level 1-2 in the Minneapolis studio. In her classes, she likes to keep things light and fun while focusing on the basics. “I think a solid foundation is really important. I enjoy breaking down movements for my students, and working with them in class, in ways that actually feel like dancing.” In keeping with Cassandra’s philosophy, she recognizes that not everyone wants to perform, but she teaches the class with professional level standards.

This has paid off, and she really enjoys teaching and watching her students’ progress. “We recently did choreography for our winter session and it was fun to see how the students worked with what I gave them. To see them perform was such a fun experience.”

Angela’s also thrilled that some of her beginning students are now in levels 3 and 4. “I love that they’ve continued. I think that’s pretty cool.”

Renee Szudy

Renee Szudy has been teaching belly dance for about ten years, and it has always been her goal to be a teacher. “I just love teaching. It’s such a positive experience for students to dance with other dancers who are also studying together. The most important thing for me is that people enjoy themselves and connect with the movements and music.” In her classes people are encouraged to dance and feel moved by the music. It is also how Renee performs, expressing joy and connection to the art form.

Renee had been a gymnast in her youth. At a UN conference for women, she saw Middle Eastern dance for the first time and was intrigued. Her interest led to taking a class with Cassandra at the University of Minnesota. “Seeing Cassandra move in the classroom context was very inspirational. Her movements are so clear and clean. It hooked me right away. I fell in love with it.”

Now that Renee’s an instructor herself, currently teaching levels 1, 3 and a mixed level 3-4, she said Cassandra’s influence has been so important to her teaching style. “It’s important to me to teach people things I’ve specifically learned from Cassandra, and that is to connect to the roots of the dance and respect the culture it comes from.” From Renee’s perspective, it’s one of the things that distinguishes The Cassandra School from many others—the attention to dance technique and Arab culture.

Like a lot of people who are passionate about the art form, Renee wants to share all the positive things belly dance can do for people. “Most of all I want to contribute to the elevation of the art form.”



*Renee Szudy photo by
Terra Sura*

Upcoming Events

[Jawaahir’s Annual Caravan Under the Stars](#) is THE gala event to be at on Thursday, May 10 at 6:00pm! Cassandra and Jawaahir invite you to join us for an evening of celebration and gratitude of our beloved supporters....YOU! We’ll have a short performance from Cassandra and Jawaahir for you to enjoy, sumptuous hors d’oeuvres, a silent auction bursting with amazing things for you to bid on, and a super fun live auction. Plus, Angela, from [Ancient Traditions Mehndi](#) will be here to give you some beautiful henna. [Online reservations of \\$30 now](#), or \$35 at the door. Our gala will be held at our Minneapolis studio.



*Caravan Under the Stars 2017 photo by
Jan Geisen*

For further information on any of our upcoming events, check out the [Jawaahir website](#). You may also call 612-872-6050, or email us at admin@jawaahir.org.



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