

SAN GABRIEL VALLEY

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CITY EDITOR PHIL DRAKE • (626) 962-8811, EXT. 2110 • phil.drake@sgvn.com

Classroom blues

School of arts forced out at local church

By Araceli Esparza
STAFF WRITER

EL MONTE — David Wilson, 11, transferred to Creative Planet School of the Arts after he got bullied at his other school two years ago.

Come June 30, the El Monte resident — along with fellow classmates and their teachers — will be moving again, as Creative Planet leaves its home at First United Methodist Church, 3903 N. Tyler Ave. in El Monte.

School officials are looking for a new home, and they say they're without answers as to why they must leave in the first place.

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Methodist
Church

The school is being evicted because the contract was expiring and another group was interested in moving in, said Marna LeBeck.

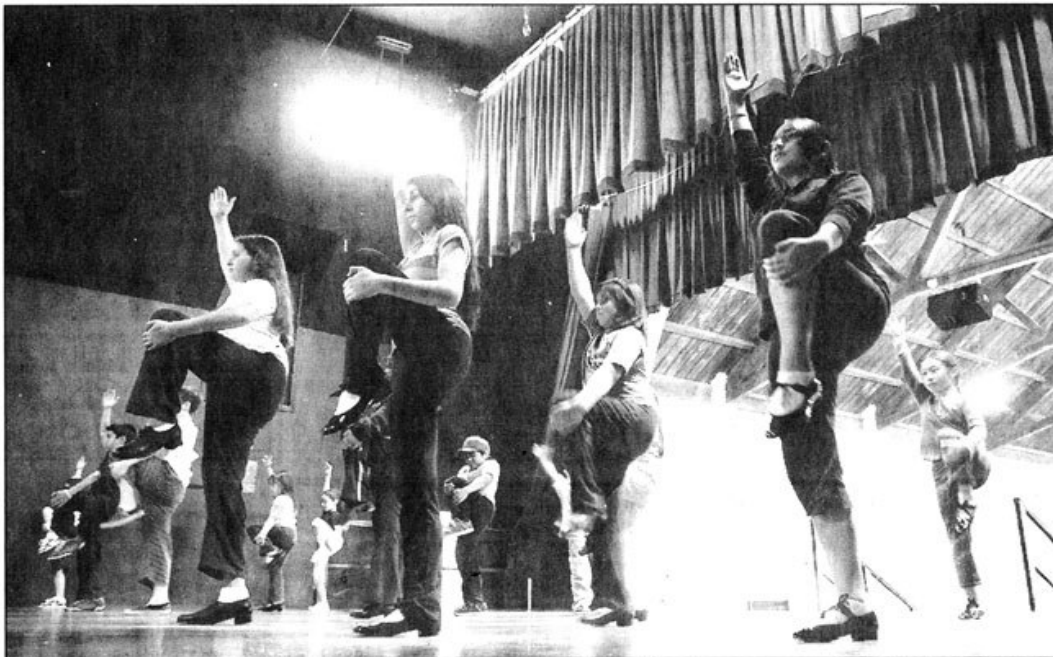
"Unfortunately, our church is in a financial squeeze," said LeBeck, a longtime member of First United Methodist.

LeBeck, whose husband, Glynn, serves on the church's board, added First United Methodist celebrated its 100-year anniversary in January. The church's congregation is primarily elderly, the Arcadia resident said, so members' contributions toward the church are limited.

Creative Planet had been

invited us to move in because they felt that our school's mission was directly aligned with the mission of their church," Michelle Benton, co-founder of Creative Planet, said of First United Methodist Church's associates. "They originally said we could move there because we're a school for low-income families."

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Staff photos by LEO JARZOMB

STUDENTS at the private Creative Planet School of the Arts practice tap exercises on the stage at First United Methodist Church in El Monte recently. Church directors have asked the school to vacate the property.



evicted from the El Monte-based Wesleyan Church, which had leased space to the school in late 2002 after leaders of that congregation called its dance and yoga lessons "sinful."

LeBeck said her congregation's eviction of the group is not related.

"The only reason that we had to ask Creative Planet School of the Arts to move is simply that they did not have enough resources financially to help us keep our doors open," she said. "The other school (Pearl Preparatory Academy) came and checked our facilities over and offered more income to the church."

Creative Planet, founded in 2001 as a private arts magnet elementary school, relocated to First United Methodist Church's facility in 2003. Last year, the group gained non-profit status for its academic



TEACHER AMY RODRIGUEZ critiques students' creative writing assignments at Creative Planet School in a classroom at First United Methodist Church. Above left, three students walk in the hall with their guitars.

and art-centered work with low-income families throughout the San Gabriel Valley.

Benton, 25, said most of the school's kindergarten-through eighth-grade students are from the El Monte and South El Monte areas. Many enroll in the program because of their interest in performing arts or for other varied reasons.

"Eighty percent of these kids come from single par-

ents," said Bill Rugh, artistic director and principal at Creative Planet. "They are doing poorly in school grade-wise or have behavioral problems, and we turn them around."

At this point, plans to relocate the Creative Planet are ongoing, said Benton. The school has been given some options for a new home, but none is in close proximity to the El Monte area or none can house a group their size.

"We just like a place where we could feel safe place for this (program) to remain and to be offered to the community and continue to flourish," said Rugh.

For more information on Creative Planet, call (626) 442-1253 or visit www.cpsoa.org.

Araceli Esparza can be reached at (626) 962-8811, Ext. 2303, or by e-mail at araceli.esparza@sgvn.com.