New York luncheon helps kickoff arts foundation

Alexis Rocker of Lakeland joins Charles Strouse of New York who composed the music for the musical "Annie" and Rebecca Renfroe-Borneman, also of New York, at Sardi's Restaurant in the Big Apple to launch the Betsye Kay Finch Performing Arts Foundation.
[PHOTO PROVIDED]

Betsye Kay Finch of Lakeland as a young dancer studying in New York.
[PHOTO PROVIDED]

Friends and students gather to honor the late Betsye Kay Finch

By Cathy Palmer
Better Living correspondent

Although her Lakeland dance school is long gone, her toe taps and stage cues just echoes, her ebullient spirit and indomitable talent are still here, personified in countless dancers she taught, actors she mentored and friends left to mourn her death.

Betsye Kay Finch, who died at 93 in 2019, still lives in the tunes yet to be sung, steps to be choreographed and roles to be played, all because her daughter and a host of her friends and students have rallied to establish the Betsye Kay Finch Performing Arts Foundation.

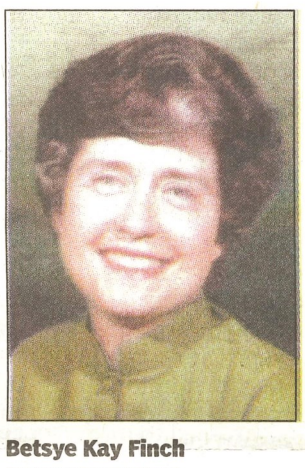
The foundation, according to Finch's daughter Alexis Rocker, is a tribute to a woman who left her mark on the arts on the Lakeland community long after she closed the doors to her studio years ago. "We're hoping to fund scholarships for dancers and musical theater aspirants so they can continue their education in the arts my mother loved so much," Rocker said.

Rocker launched the foundation several months ago with a star-studded luncheon at New York's famous Sardi's Restaurant, where Finch and her fellow dancers and students studying at the Feagin School of the Arts in New York City gathered to decompress from days of tryouts, rehearsals and performances. Finch lived at The Rehearsal Club, an old, renovated house in New York for budding female dancers and actors in the heart of the big city's theater district. There she learned what would become her lifelong mantra: "Listen to the rhythm, dance in the tune."

Among those attending that October lunch were friends who included such dignitaries as "Annie" composer Charles Strouse.

"I'm impressed that so many people came to Sardi's to honor Betsye. She was a beautiful dancer and she did so much for her hometown with her dance studio," Strouse said.

Also attending were Betsye Kay's son Al Finch; former Rehearsal Club residents; and Rebecca Renfroe-Borneman, a former student and well-known Broadway performer whose career spanned some 30 years.



Betsye Kay Finch
[PHOTO PROVIDED]

Renfroe-Borneman described Finch through a song she composed and presented: "New York was a picture frame she wrapped around her life, a Rockette sting, a drama class, a musical to see. A woman's life of loving art, she gave it all to me. Dancing in the tune, watching children fly, dancing through the songs, the dancer never dies."

Those words were echoed by former student Lindsey Alley of New York, who gained fame as a Mouseketeer at Disney World and a host of New York productions. "I'll never forget her joyous zest for life," Alley said in a phone interview. "She was an inspiration not only to me, but to so many others." She also recalled Finch "coming over almost every day after school to help me with my homework because she knew we needed to know more than how to perform or dance."

Alley also recalled her first trip to New York with Finch when the plane had to "crash land" on foam. "She was giggling as we slid down the escape chute. It was amazing," she said. "That was just her, always so full of life."

Not only was Finch full of life, her life was full too. She passed on dance steps, drama tips and mentored dozens of young students who would dedicate their lives to the arts she loved so much.

Laurie Wood who now lives in Greensborough, North Carolina, says her former teacher changed her life.

"She was a constant inspiration to me. Without Betsye Kay and dance, I don't know where I would be," Wood said. She cited Finch's belief in her as the impetus to join the ranks of professional dancers and ultimately be a choreographer in Miami and Colorado.

Laura Quinn, formerly of Miami and now back home in Lakeland, echoes Wood's comments. "She had a profound influence on us all," Quinn said. "She was that kind of woman. She gave us an outlet to perform. She loved dance, she loved the theater and she loved us. And, she made it fun."

Although surrounded by artists, Rocker didn't join Finch's other proteges with a career in the arts. "I took dance lessons, of course," the Tampa resident said. "and when I finally told her it wasn't for me, she said 'It's about time you figured it out.'"

While Rocker spent years working on Wall Street, she also realized the Big Apple wasn't for her either. She moved back to Central Florida several years ago to be closer to her mother. "Even though I wasn't going to follow her in the arts, she always stressed education and her love of learning was instilled in both her children and her students," Rocker said.

Using that impetus, Rocker established the foundation to further her mother's legacy. She says it will provide scholarships to young Lakeland area dancers and Broadway want to be's. "I just want to keep my mother's spirit alive by supporting aspiring high school dancers and theater arts students with college scholarships," she said.

The scholarships will be awarded to graduating high school seniors.

Anyone interested in learning more about the foundation or in donating to the Betsye Kay Finch Performing Arts Foundation can contact Rocker via bkfperformingarts@gmail.com, or forward donations to the Betsye Kay Finch Foundation at 4798 S. Florida Ave. No. 225, Lakeland, FL 33813.