

Meet new Executive Director Kirov Academy of Ballet (KAB) Jonathan Pak (Park)

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Jonathan Pak (Park)

Question: Tell me about yourself.

Although I was born in Seoul, Korea, I came to Washington DC when I was six years old. As a result, I have few memories of my early years. We moved here because my Dad was with the Korean Embassy. We first lived in Arlington, Virginia, which is where I went to elementary school. Later, we moved to McLean, Virginia. I went to Langley High School, where I was very involved in student government. Not to brag, but I was Class President in tenth grade, and was elected to the Student Council as class representative in the eleventh. It was here that the seeds of my interest in public policy and public administration began to sprout, and were later nurtured during my college years at Yale, and graduate school at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

But after high school graduation, I went back to Korea – mainly to learn Korean! At first, it was very difficult for me because even though I am Korean, and I look Korean, I couldn't speak the language hardly at all. When non-Koreans go to Korea, and try to speak the language, most Korean people cut them slack. Not so for me! I suffered from reverse discrimination until my language skills improved. This is ironic especially because I did not suffer from discrimination in the US – at that time there were so few of us [Koreans] that I didn't even realize I was a minority.

While I was growing up in northern Virginia, my younger sisters studied ballet, but I had no interest in dance at that time. I studied Tae Kwon Do, which is a martial arts combat sport that originated in Korea. However, Tae Kwon Do training and ballet do have some important common skills such as – flexibility, balance, strength, speed and stamina.

Question: How did you first become connected to KAB?

My sister, Julia (Hoon Sook) Pak Moon, had become an international ballerina, dancing with companies all over the world. Through her, my father, Dr. Bo Hi Pak, discovered Russian classical ballet, which to him was the most beautiful art form he could imagine. He was especially enchanted with the grace and beauty of the Mariinsky, then known as the Kirov Ballet, in St. Petersburg, Russia. He wanted to share his love for this art form with others, and so, in 1984, he brought his vision to Korea. From this beginning, there are now two classical ballet academies as well as a performance company, the Universal Ballet Company, employing 65 full time dancers in Korea. All are under Julia's direction.

Next, he brought Russian classical ballet to the US, opening the Kirov Academy of Ballet in Washington in 1990. Julia became board chair 10 years ago, and I was asked to be a member of the board. Dad's vision was to make Seoul and Washington the mecca for Russian classical ballet. I was honored to be asked to help achieve his vision. I believe that if he were a younger man he would be working to build the world's greatest ballet school and company in Washington DC today!

Question: Did you have any hesitations about becoming Acting Executive Director?

Yes. I did hesitate because of the time and commitment that it will take. For many years, I have been responsible for creating, managing and growing businesses in asset management, real estate development, media, and other fields. I think that Dad and Julia asked me because of my management experience, in both the business and nonprofit worlds. In general, about 70-80% of the issues in the business and nonprofit worlds (organization, supervision, human resources, finance etc.) are similar. The other 20% or so is very different. For example, KAB is focused on training professional artists who can perpetuate a beautiful art form and spread beauty throughout society and into peoples' lives and not at all on making a profit. For profit corporations do not have a reason to exist if they do not make a profit, a financial return.

Question: What most surprised you about KAB? Even though you have closely watched the academy grow over the years, it must still be different to be here every day.

I was pleasantly surprised exactly how very special the school really is. I've heard many times that KAB is unique and a special place but I never really felt it deeply. Through many small experiences while working and talking with people and witnessing the actual teaching, learning and workings of the Academy I really came to understand and feel that KAB is truly a unique place. When one parent said to me recently "KAB is a treasure," I not only knew it in my head but felt it keenly in my heart. It is truly inspiring to be here, watching youngsters working so hard to grow as ballet dancers, and as people.

Question: What do you see as your biggest challenge at KAB?

I want KAB to be financially solid and stable for the long term. Our financial resources need to grow so that the school will prosper. This is more than just a need to grow revenue and control expenses. We hope to find people who will support our efforts to find and train the very best talented students of ballet from all over the world so that this beautiful art form can be perpetuated and enjoyed by all.