

# Sandra, oral history interview... Loud

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David Allison 00:00

Well, thank you so much for joining me, Sandra. And I'd love for you to just kind of introduce yourself, share your name, and just a little bit about yourself and we'll kind of start there.

Sandra Parks 00:13

Sure. My name is Sandra Parks, and I am the current artistic director for Colorado Conservatory of Dance. And, I joined the team in September 2023, and immediately before, I was on the East Coast, directing an arts department for a private high school. Prior to that, I spent 10 plus years in higher education, and prior to that, I was a professional dancer, mostly on the East Coast in New York City, Boston. And, I'm also a founder and director of another nonprofit called Women In Dance, that promotes female leadership, particularly in dance and through dance education.

David Allison 00:56

Wonderful, thank you. Could you just share maybe a little bit more about your trajectory? I think that's so interesting that you were a dancer yourself, and then you were in higher education for a while and, what motivated those kinds of changes from your career from one thing to the next?

Sandra Parks 01:18

Yeah, so, I am actually from Taiwan originally, so I was an immigrant. And when I went to New York, after pursuing my college degree in dance from NYU Tisch School of the Arts, I started performing. But then, in order to continue working in a consistent and legal way, I discovered an opportunity to teach for a particular dance school in New York. And at the time, I really wasn't sure that was the direction I wanted to go into. But then after one year, I was introduced to another nonprofit in Boston, where they do a lot of community engagement, dance education programming, and that's when I truly saw and experienced the power of dance education, because those students are not necessarily having the opportunity to experience dance the way that they want to.

David Allison 02:21

Right.

Sandra Parks 02:23

I was really fortunate. I worked with that organization for about five years, you know, teaching in mostly high schools, but in different areas of Boston. And that's when I decided to pursue my master's degree in dance, MFA in dance, and that is technically a terminal degree for dance, you know, if you want to teach in higher ed. At the time, I just wanted to learn more about teaching and pedagogy. And then I sort of just started teaching in college; there are so many colleges in Boston, and I really enjoyed that. It's just different kinds of conversations with collegiate students, right? So then, that's when I thought, Okay, I really enjoyed that, and I wanted to go into higher ed. And after a while, and mostly working with students who want to be dance professionals, or in the dance field, I realized this lack of funding for them, usually for the arts, right, but for dance, it's very limited. So then, I was like, Okay, I know there are so many great educators out there that can nurture professional dance artists, but who is going to nurture a dance audience or develop an audience? And so that's sort of why I started looking beyond this sort of 'dance majors' scope. And that's when I ended up directing the arts department in a private high school. And then this particular, but then I was sort of taken out of studio completely. So I was completely an administrator...

David Allison 04:07

Yeah, yeah.

Sarah Parks 04:08

...which I appreciated the opportunity to advocate for my colleagues. At the same time, I really, really miss the moments and the time that I can spend with the students and with the dancers, especially in a studio. And so when the opportunity came up as the artistic director for Colorado Conservatory of Dance, I never thought I would want to work with such a wide range. I did that, but I've done that but in the pocket way.

David Allison 04:39

Yeah.

Sandra Parks 04:40

And so, after really looking through what CCD has been offering, you know, particularly, you know, first, it's the conservatory portion of it, right, that's high quality dance education. And then, the big component is the community education programs, as well. These two components were really exciting to see. Then, to have the opportunity to serve, you know, to guide or to nurture the passion for dance and eventually, either become professionals or supporters. I think that this position sort of fulfilled both of my goals, my career goals and my passion for dance. So, yeah, so that's sort of why I ended up being here; lots of left turns and right turns, but I think this is what I had been waiting for.

David Allison 05:31

Oh, that's great. I love that. It's fun to see those things kind of make a kind of dovetail in that way. That's really neat. So tell me, as you were coming to Colorado, had you visited Colorado much or thought much about the state? Anything like that? You know, Boston is very different from Colorado, as is Taiwan. So, you know, what...?

Sandra Parks 05:58

Yeah. Yeah. Or New York, right?.

David Allison 06:02

Yes, and New York, too. Yes.

Sandra Parks 06:04

So when I was on the national tour, an international tour of *The King and I*, the Broadway show, I did perform in Colorado Springs and Fort Collins, and then we passed through Denver, as it's sort of, like, just days off. So that's the extent that I've had, in terms of what I remembered about Colorado, I just remember the high altitude, and when we were performing, the fire department actually set up oxygen tanks for all of the dancers because they believed we needed it. We didn't think so, but then they were absolutely right. (Laughter)

And so that's all; I only visited that time, and that's a while back. And so, I didn't know much about Colorado, however, I do know two of my former, I want to say they're more mentors than colleagues, because they certainly have been really great influences throughout my career. I know they're here, so one of them is a professor at CU Boulder. I had a chance to speak with her about the dance world in around, you know, Boulder, Denver, you know, this whole area. And then another person, who actually would have been my dean at the school, where I was teaching. And, he hired me as the dean, but then, he got a new position...

David Allison 07:44

I see.

Sandra Parks 07:45

...at CU Denver, so, I didn't get a chance, I only worked with him for a year at my position when he was the dean, but also, knowing what he has been doing for them in Denver, I'm really excited to know all that. And also the focus on not necessarily just this, we call it, the concert music, concert dance, but then it's also really involved with the industry. That's also very exciting to me. So, that's the people I know, before I came here, I think that that sort of trust is there, so I feel like it will be a really great fit. And I certainly visited the school; I came for the final interview process. I got to teach the students from about 10 to 12 years old to even adult students.

David Allison 08:42

Oh, nice.

Sandra Parks 08:43

And after about two and a half days here, and those two and a half days really solidified that this place is going to be a great fit for me, and I'm just glad that I was going to be a great fit for them.

David Allison 08:56

That's great. That's great. So, tell me just a little bit more about some of the activities and work at the Conservatory of Dance, and what gets you kind of excited about that work.

Sandra Parks 09:14

So, we have like two big entities, right? We have the Conservatory, which is in Broomfield, and we have a space, which is gorgeous. I don't know if you have the chance to come visit yet, but it's amazing. I was really surprised to see the space when I first came here, and then, I realized because it used to be a professional dance company plus the school, so that makes sense why there's great space, and multiple studios, and all that. So, we have the Conservatory classes. We serve from, I think, one and a half year-olds to 80 plus, just a huge range of students. And also, we offer, we are a ballet focus school in the Conservatory, but we also offer different dance forms, including modern, contemporary, jazz, tap, and salsa, and partnering dance. And we also have the capacity to offer smaller, like, maybe every month, we offer a different dance form. And since my arrival, we have offered Cuban contemporary, swing dance, and Gaga technique, which is a contemporary dance technique, and we're hoping to continue that as well. And then the second, this other half of CCD, is our community education programs, like I was mentioning. So, we serve four different counties. Adams is the one, that's one of our biggest counties. We serve Jefferson County, Broomfield County, and Boulder County. So, we provide after school dance programs, with very, very minimum resources needed from the school, sometimes zero resources required from the school.

David Allison 11:10

Oh, that's great.

Sandra Parks 11:11

And we do in-school, we collaborated with another subject, for example, right now, we're working with Performing Arts School on Broadway. So, we collaborate with their theater programs, so that their dance portion is every day, Monday through Friday, but the curriculum is in relation to their theater curriculum. And the students sort of swap between dance and theater, and that's sort of our move to learn program. It can be short, as a residency, like 10 weeks, it can also be a full year, what we're doing with ASPI (???), for example.

And, we also bring different dance performances to the school, like, we are in the midst of doing our anti-bullying ballet program. So every year, we create a new dance that's based on the idea of anti-bullying. And this year, we're really fortunate that we are collaborating with Youth Inc., which is another nonprofit organization, to really explore this idea of anti-bullying from a social, emotional learning perspective, right. So, it's not just going to be a dance performance, it's more of an interactive, like, what did you see on stage? And, you know, kiddos will raise their hands. And like, did you, what sort of emotions do you feel when you see these things and, and just have a conversation with them about, you know, how can we all work together to stop bullying, right?

So, those community education programs are super time-consuming. But yeah, it's so amazing to see those students, our students, when we are engaging with them, and their enthusiasm for dance and their passion for dance. Yeah, and we're really fortunate that we have faculty members who are bilingual, because a lot of our students that we serve are Latinx background. So, we have teachers who are bilingual, who can speak to them in their own language, and also be able to teach dances from their cultures as well. Like I said, we have salsa dance, we have Mexican folkloricas. So it's really, you know, we're fortunate that we have these faculty members that are with us where how, you know, there are high level instruction. So, those are the two entities that make me excited, from an educational perspective. And of course, we do a lot of performances, right?

David Allison 13:50

Yes.

Sandra Parks 13:51

We do The Nutcracker during the fall, or in the winter, and we also create, create or present, a spring mainstage show. This year is really exciting, that it is a full-on CCD creation; it is inspired by *Secret Garden*, the book. But in terms of the entire narrative, in terms of the choreography, it's all going to be created by CCD faculty and staff, so this is really exciting, yeah.

David Allison 14:25

Yeah, that's kind of neat. Thank you so much. That's wonderful. What are some of the, kind of, and I'm thinking about some of the community engagement work that you do, and getting into schools, and that work? What are some examples of how it's impactful for students or for people that are a part of it? Like, what does it unlock for people when they're able to participate and be part of that?

Sandra Parks 14:55

I will have to say that right now, because it's my first year, so it's hard for me to say what is the most evidence of impact for our current students, right? Obviously, we send out a survey of what they, you know, what they experience, what their experience is like. But, in terms of things that I could experience, it was when we went to show the anti-bullying dance this year, like we just did, we did three, one of the elementary schools that we serve, the Pinnacle School in Adams County. The amount of enthusiasm and the sound that they create, when they see their teacher on stage talking to them, when they see that they are older, because we bring our Conservatory high school age students to perform. You know, when we ask them, "Do you want to meet them?" Their reaction is telling me that they are excited to see what we can offer them. And when we ask them questions, the enthusiasm of, like, responding to the questions of, Yeah, I, you know, we asked them, like, "What do you think, if someone is behaving like a bully towards you, what do you think you will do?" And then, the amount of response that that comes back to us, it's very evident that they are enjoying the process, they're engaged within the process. Now, in terms of the impact, I'm not going to be able to say there's impact in three months, I guess that's just because, for me, that does not count as a real impact, the impact is going to be a longer process.

But for me, personally, because I've done community engagement education programs, I have seen students, you know, because of their passion for dance or for arts, that will propel them to want to focus on their academic more, or because of the skills they learned in the environment of, like, resiliency, and being able to, sort of, strive for the best, but also accept the fact that it's, it's going to be a process that helped them with their academics, so that they don't feel discouraged because they didn't get a good grade on one particular exam. And then, just being able to see them understanding the collaborative effort and working with each other. Like that's impact, that's clear to me through my past experience. Certainly, I would love to, I'm sure I will see this here as well, but like I said, I can't give you any evidence after three months of being here, because that will not be genuine. But my hope is to be able to see that.

David Allison 18:02

Absolutely. Yeah. And that seems like that collaborative piece of working towards a project, going in that, you know, that kind of creative space together, following that journey together, just seems so useful and beneficial for students. So that's really cool. Can you share just a little bit more about, maybe, the community of Broomfield, and, you know, what are some, either challenges of this area or things that you've noticed around, you know, partnerships and working, that doesn't work well? So kind of, maybe, both sides there.

Sandra Parks 18:45

And particularly in Broomfield?

David Allison 18:47

Yeah, or just the area? You know, I know you work with four different counties, but you're based here in Broomfield, so just kind of whatever comes to mind. Yeah.

Sandra Parks 18:53

All right, I will say, so far, my experience has been really positive. And in most all of the events that I have attended, everybody's really open to know more about what we do. And I think even though CCD has been a nonprofit for, like, more than 10 years now, many, maybe a lot of the partners within the Broomfield area do not know that. So I think, when they learn about that, they're all very excited about what we offer and what we do. And certainly, the closest communities that I engage with are families, right, and they're all very supportive of their children's well-beings while they're pursuing their love and passion for dance, which is really important to me, and important to CCD, you know, their well-being is the most important part. And so, that was very refreshing, not refreshing, I think, very nice to see because there are, outside of Broomfield, like in the whole dance community in the US or even in the world, yes, there are training grounds that are not necessarily putting students' well-being at the top priority, which is, you know, not something I will ever want to be part of. And I'm just really happy and glad to see CCD is putting that as a top priority, and our immediate communities are very supportive of that idea.

David Allison 20:40

That's great.

Sandra Parks 20:41

And, yeah, and in terms of the external communities, again, it's just based on, really, based on some of the events I have been to in this short period of time, everybody seems very supportive of what we do. And obviously, going through the *Nutcracker* season, you know, having really great attendance of the performances, you know, that sort of validates that people here in the Broomfield area do support what we do here at CD. So yeah.

David Allison 21:11

That's wonderful. Now, I love that, and yeah, so I understand, and I only understand this, kind of, secondhand, so it may be 100% false, but there are some dance companies that sort of resent that they have to do *Nutcracker*, because it's like, Oh, we always do *Nutcracker*. And it's so, you know, everybody knows it, or whatever. What's your take on that, just generally?

Sandra Parks 21:39

Interestingly, most of my colleagues or friends of mine who are in the dance field who know me really, really well, they were really actually surprised that I am back in the *Nutcracker* land. (Laughter)  
Because it's particularly with the content of the second act of *Nutcracker* that I have been spending a lot of my energy in researching dance and culture, right, so that we represent a culture in a respectful way. And in the past, we couldn't do that, and by in the past, I meant, like, 19th century. They couldn't do that the most informed way, right? And I'm not blaming you know, they should be doing something more informed because it's impossible. But in today's standard, we can no longer say, Oh, we are not informed, which is completely a lie, right?

David Allison 22:44

Absolutely. Yeah.

Sandra Parks 22:45

So then the way that I was looking at our *Nutcracker* is, what can we do? Or what can I do with the short period of time that I just joined in September, when we perform in December? So I think that's another reason why CCD attracted me, was I am not the only person thinking this way. So the entire staff and faculty already had this idea of, how do we move forward? How can we move the *Nutcracker* into the 21st century with the most culturally informed way?

So this year, the way we looked at the pieces, the second act particularly, is we took out the actual cultural title. So instead of calling it Arabian coffee, we call it coffee. And instead of calling a Chinese tea, we call it tea. Now, that also can come to another question: are we not respecting Tchaikovsky's intention?

David Allison 23:51

Sure

Sandra Parks 23:52

How he named these numbers. Now, I also know why he named his numbers because the choreographer asked him to do it, right. So this is our approach for this year. That was last year, December 2023. And because of my background, even though I was trained mostly in classical ballet, I did have Chinese classical dance training. So I brought the basic, more of an elementary level, Chinese dance to our students. So then we can learn a little bit about that and then that's how we created the team number this year. We brought in you probably also know this company called Colorado fiesta.

David Allison 24:42

Yes.

Sandra Parks 24:43

We are really fortunate that Mr. Nitrio (spelling? name?) came in and worked with our students in chocolate, what, AKA, what we know as a Spanish number, and we also brought in another dancer who studied and competed actually, in what we call the belly dance, or aka the Arabic cultural dance. We



brought someone in to coach our students a little bit about the arm movements, you know, from the Arabic culture perspective.

So my goal is to really look at that, in every number and make sure we find ways to present the dances in the most respectful and authentic way. It's also for me, you know, it's also difficult to say, we're going to be able to present it at the highest level because to be respectful of the dance form, it's like, well, how many years do we put in learning ballet? And not how much time can we actually dedicate it towards the Spanish dance or the Chinese dance, right? So it's also a mindset for our dancers to understand that you might feel you might be doing something that is going to be elementary, from this particular dance form. But that is how we're going to respect that form to the fullest. You are going to do your (Snell?), your (arg?) to your highest level in ballet, but then within these movements, within these dance forms, we will need to do a little bit of digging and understanding and exploring. So that's my goal. And I will be happy to be that person to present that first Nutcracker that is actually respectful of all the cultures that we can possibly pay tribute to.

26:46 David Allison

Yeah, that was such a wonderful thing and thank you for explaining that. I really appreciate it. And I think it's a really important thing to do, to be culturally, not just sensitive, but responsive. And it's really important. So thank you for that. And, you know, I think we're unfortunately kind of, at the end of our time, I need to pop off. But I really appreciate you spending some time chatting with me. And yeah, I'd love to chat again some time, too.

27:13 Sandra Parks

Definitely, yeah, I'm so happy to get a chance to share some of our thoughts about dance and CCD with you. So let me know how, I know there's a project so let me know if CCD can be any support in any way.

27:27 David Allison

Absolutely. Thank you. We will definitely keep you in the loop on things as we progress and welcome to Broomfield, too.

27:32 Sandra Park

Thank you, thank you and have a wonderful weekend.

27:34 David Allison

You too. Take care.

27:36 Sandra Park

Bye bye