

“Dear Mr. McKayle...”



*Dance Major Journal continues to pay tribute to the legendary choreographer Donald McKayle, who died in April 2018. DMJ originates on the campus where he made new work for his Etude Dance Ensemble every year. Above, his last Etude ensemble gathered at McKayle’s commemorative star at the University of California Irvine.*

*Dance major Sadie Sandoval (third from right) was one of the many young dancers who discovered what an impact McKayle could make—and will continue making through his creations and the dancers he affected. For an assignment to write a letter to someone who made a difference in her dance world, Sandoval knew who her choice would be.*

Dear Mr. McKayle,

Thank you for taking a chance on me and seeing my potential when I didn’t even know what I was capable of. I came to UC Irvine with a deep love for dance but no clear aspirations or direction of what would spark a greater interest. Because of you I found that spark. I found a deeper value and love for dance than I thought I could ever possess.

The first time I saw your work was in the UC Irvine Dance Visions concert my freshman year when “Crossing the Rubicon” was first performed by the Etude Ensemble. In your own words, the piece “follows the current plight of refugees and their experiences, struggles, and fears. It is meant to remind us that even as these people flee from crimes against humanity they remain human beings; aching from loss, fearing the unknown, finding tender moments in the chaos of fleeing, and banding together as a collective to help one another.”

Throughout the performance I felt as though I was in a trance. I was in awe of the fact that a dance could affect me so emotionally, and by the end I was in tears. I turned to my friend and said, “I have to do that.” Your ensemble gave all of themselves. They performed for something greater than themselves and after knowing you, I know they did it for you too. I barely even

knew who you were at the time or how valuable and influential you were to the world of dance but soon I would. I also had no idea how much you would change my life and my dancing.

Following the performance, I worked every day with you in mind and knew that if I wanted to work with you I had to work the hardest that I ever had. The rest of freshman year I felt like I had such a strong drive and purpose, working towards this goal. I auditioned for your Etude Ensemble in May, and we had to submit a statement of why we wanted to be in the Ensemble prior to the audition. I wrote about my experience seeing *Crossing the Rubicon* and that I had so much admiration for you choreographing and continuing to teach your students from a wheelchair. My mom was in a wheelchair at the end of her life and although it made life more challenging and frustrating, having been physically active all her life, she never let it stop her from coming to my dance performances and being a part of my life for as long as she could. I saw her spirit in you. It was clear how much you loved your Ensemble and that you wanted to give as much of your knowledge and love for dance to us as you could.

At the audition, the first piece we learned was *Crossing the Rubicon*, and I did everything I could to embody the same qualities of the performance I saw. Little did I know that the next day, I would be accepted into your Ensemble, and one year later I was performing the piece that inspired me so much. The day I found out I was accepted had to be one of the best days of my life. That next year was filled with so many amazing experiences because of you. It was both the best and hardest year at UC Irvine. I doubted myself more than I ever had. I questioned my place in the Ensemble and too often got in my own way because I thought I didn't deserve to dance for you. But it was also the most confident I ever felt about my dancing, knowing that you saw something in me, I just didn't know what it was quite yet.



*Donald McKayle with Sarah Kroll (left) and Sadie Sandoval, in 2018*

That April, we lost you. I never thought I could feel such grief for someone that I knew for less than a year. Walking into the same studio for rehearsal was difficult for the longest time and felt empty without your presence at the front of the studio. Our final performance, “Bittersweet Farewell,” was exactly that—the final time we would all perform your work together in your honor. It was the final goodbye to the Ensemble that brought me so much inspiration and made me feel that I was exactly where I was meant to be. It was a final goodbye to your work, and it felt like we were finally saying goodbye to you.

With all goodbyes there is sadness, but there is also joy when reflecting on amazing memories and experiences that I had. Your passing was one of the hardest things that I had had to experience since I lost my mom a few years before. It was hard because of the love and respect I had for you. I would not be who I am today without you. As long as I am dancing, I will always continue to pay forward my gratitude for you and dance, with you in my heart.

With love,  
Sadie Sandoval

*Sadie Sandoval graduated in June 2020 with a BFA in Dance Performance, receiving Excellence in Performance, the Donald McKayle Scholarship and the Sylvia Reines Scholarship. She is now dancing with the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble as a second company member. She looks forward to continuing her modern dance career, eventually teaching at a university, and setting repertoire, especially work by Donald McKayle, on companies and ensembles.*