

Penny Furgerson – India Born in Karachi to parents who nurtured the fine arts, Penny was placed into one of the finest dance studios in Bombay, where she trained in Indian classical dance. When India declared its independence in 1947, the country began looking for representatives of the “New, Young India.” Penny was selected as one of these representatives and acted as an escort and guide to tourists. Two families she escorted were from Des Moines, and Penny built a relationship and continued to correspond with Mrs. A.H. Blank. After graduating high school, Penny received a full-ride scholarship to study pharmacology at Drake University. Penny was invited to spend holidays and summers with Mrs. Blank, and also spent a great deal of time with Eleanor Robson, the founder of Iowa International Center. Along with working as a pharmacist and health care administrator Penny and her husband saw the need for a multicultural dance school. In 1972 they founded the Gateway Theater to make dance accessible to low-income students. Today the studio continues to foster diverse artistic expression and intercultural understanding through traditional and modern multicultural dance.

Officer Doua Lor – Laos Ever since the sixth grade, Doua Lor dreamed of becoming a police officer. His father, a four-star General in the Royal Lao Army, worked with the C.I.A. to support the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Their family was eventually forced their family to flee to Thailand, where they spent three years in a refugee camp with minimal healthcare, no running water or education. In 1978, Doua arrived in Fort Worth, Texas, only able to speak a few words in English. Despite this, he worked hard in school and quickly exhibited his leadership abilities. By age eighteen he was the President of the Hmong Fort Worth Student Association. Office Lor was admitted to Iowa State University where he studied electrical engineering. He continued to pursue his childhood dream and in 1995 joined the Des Moines Police Department as a police cadet. Today Officer Lor is a Senior Police and Asian Resource Officer. He was instrumental in creating the first Asian Citizen’s Academy, where Asian citizens learn about the intimate workings of the Police Department.

Rohey Sallah – The Gambia Born in a small village in The Gambia, West Africa, Rohey was born with a congenital club foot. One of seven children, Rohey’s parents gave her to a woman she describes as a grandmother and Rohey went to live in another village. Rohey doesn’t talk about enduring physical and emotional pain growing up, of being mistreated in her village school, or of being physically reprimanded by a teacher for not being able to keep up when walking with other students. Instead, Rohey only talks about all the good that has happened to her and of the good she hopes to provide to others. A podiatrist from Des Moines University visited the village where Rohey lived and reported her circumstances to Tracy Keninger. Tracy, with the Easter Seals, made it her mission to raise money to bring her to the U.S. for treatment. She essentially adopted Rohey and has been her guardian and support system ever since. Rohey was thirteen years old and could not speak a word of English when she first arrived. She was placed in a fifth-grade class, but quickly began skipping grades as she learned English. Rohey went through three major surgeries on her foot that involved painful recoveries. Rohey now works for Easter Seals and is a role model for children with disabilities. She works to ensure that kids can stay in school and have the opportunity to attend college.