More than a decade ago, when this dynamo was the director's associate for the acclaimed arts program at UC Los Angeles, she and her husband, John Hajda, used to spend weekends in Santa Barbara. "We'd drive around and say to ourselves,
‘Can you imagine living here? Wouldn’t that be amazing?’

So, in 2000, when the opportunity arose to take over as artistic director of UC Santa Barbara’s Arts & Lectures program, Billeci was delighted to make the move. “This was an opportunity to expand a program that was in good shape and take it to the next level,” she remembers. The prospect was exciting, but even in her interview, she was outspoken about her plans. “I said right away that I would take some programs off campus. I was interested in using them to be an ambassador for the arts, and if that wasn’t all right, I wasn’t the person for the job.”

But indeed she was, and ever since, Billeci has worked to find the highest quality artists and present them to the community that she and Hajda (now a music professor at UCSB), together with their 2-year-old son, Alexander, are happy to call home.

As a young woman, Billeci had a very different life in mind. Born in Sacramento in 1964, she was raised in an arts-oriented family and began dancing at the age of 3. She taught dance while she was still in high school, studied in New York, and thought performing would be her career. Instead of going to college, she moved to Los Angeles at 17 to dance—mostly jazz, modern, and for music videos—but after a couple of years, she missed school and applied to UCLA as a communications studies major.

“The arts were always in the back of my mind,” she says. “And UCLA had the largest and most prestigious university performing arts program in the country.” When she was about to graduate, Billeci met with that program’s director to find out what the field of arts administration was like. It didn’t take much to convince her that she had found her calling.

Flash forward to 2008. The former dancer is now offstage and loving it, the driving force—alongside her talented staff, and conscience, and I think that is part of the particular treasure that Arts & Lectures represents.”

Billeci never loses sight of the community. Outreach is important, she notes, citing the three-year-old Viva el Arte program that she developed with former county arts commissioner Patrick Davis and Rod Latham, board president of the Marjorie Luke Theatre. “We serve three communities—Guadalupe, Isla Vista, and east Santa Barbara,” she says. Six artists each year perform and give demonstrations over four days. “It’s all in Spanish, and it’s free,” she emphasizes. “It’s one of the things I’m most proud of.”

Raising money for it all has become a constant challenge. With the university contributing only 8 percent of the funding, Billeci has to find the other 92 percent. “We have to make the case to the community that the programs we love will only exist with their support.” Of course, she admits, she doesn’t take “no” easily—and has already begun to push for an endowment. “Fifteen to 25 million dollars would do nicely,” she says. “It would give us the flexibility to play in the same league with bigger cities.” Eventually, she adds, she’d love to see a new performing arts center on campus—something bigger than 800-seat Campbell Hall.

“The Granada and the Arlington are fantastic,” she notes of the downtown venues. While they respectively seat 1,500 and 2,000, she adds, UCSB needs a larger facility. “There are over 20,000 students!” The campaign launches in 2009 to coincide with the program’s 50th anniversary.

Beyond her efforts to see the program through to a sustainable future, it’s her role as educator that Billeci most enjoys about her post. “It’s so rewarding to see the audience respond. If some obscure dance company performs and wows them, for example, it’s those aha! moments that are the most fulfilling.”