

No Boys Beyond this Point

Confessions of a High School Dance Teacher

Getting started is always the hardest part. I tend to have thoughts of music and choreography, but I never seem to be able to organize them. Then someone will generally throw something out, a spin to the floor or a footwork sequence that jives precociously with the music, something so off the wall that it, well, it was literally coming off the wall. And that's how it all seems to happen. But I've jumped ahead...I first have to tell you how this all started. I'll be brief.

“James Brown, who knew?”

In 1996 I had a very lovely job teaching dance at Lamar High School, in the Houston Independent School District. I was director of the Fine Arts Dance Program, with an enrollment of 200 or so. I taught 4 levels, mostly all girls, and mostly girls with good backgrounds in dance. I directed Lamar Dance Theatre, and had a good time doing it.

At mid term that year, I had a student enroll in a beginning dance class. His name was Sergio Donis, and he was a known break dancer. One afternoon he asked if he and a friend could use the dance room from practice after school. “Sure, that's ok”. They came and they played James Brown's “Superbad” over and over. I thought, “Bboys like James Brown? Who knew?” The next day Sergio and his friend came back and 4 more came with him. Next thing I knew I had bboys in the dance room everyday. Maybe I should mention this was May, and we were pretty much done with rehearsals.

Anyway, the dance room windows faced Wertheimer Rd. and the bus stop. And I noticed that instead of hanging out at the bus stop, these guys were hanging out in the dance room. It only took about 2 weeks for the dance room to be the place to be. And the dancing...it was crazy! I'd never seen anything like it. My background is modern dance and ballet, and I fancied myself a choreographer, but these guys, wow, they were throwing away more movement than I could come up with in a year. It was all so natural. Their dancing came from a place that was so honest, passionate, and necessary. They hooked me.

Through these workout sessions I met Ricky Cardenas. He was a member of Havikoro, and a graduate of Lamar. We worked that summer, got a grant to fund programs for At Risk students, and we offered a Break Dance class in the fall. We had 60 guys sign up. Again who knew! That was a wild and wooly year I tell you. But the positives were beginning to show. These kids, who had always struggled with school, were showing attendance improvements, grade improvements, and discipline improvements. We had found that all important hook to make school important.

In 1998 Lamar got a new principal who really struggled with our innovative dance program. He was from Texarkana, and he thought dance began and ended with the Kilgore Rangerettes. Ricky and I decided to try combining our Lamar Dance

Theatre girls with our best break dancers. I randomly got a competition brochure in the mail from a company called Marching Auxiliaries, and they had a category called Coed.

We shrugged our shoulders, and said lets try it.

“Honey, that’s a cow.”

So in February, we loaded up an HISD school bus and headed to Klein Oak High School of our first dance competition. In those days, Klein Oak was way out there, and very rural. Well, rural to us. We were inner city people. We drove up and quickly realized that we would have no problem finding our bus when it was over...not too many bananas amid the sea of Coaches. We get off the bus, fish out of water and one of boys says to me...”Miss, look, horses.” “No honey, that’s a cow” I replied.

We were 16 girls and 14 boys, and of course we were not dressed alike. We didn’t know. We began to walk in, and well you can imagine the looks. Children pointing, girls giggling, mother’s grabbing their purses. Ricky and I began to wonder what were we thinking.

Klein Oak is mammoth compared to Lamar. It felt like we had been transported to some outer space city. We quickly learned the “no boys beyond this point” rule. So we settled in our T shack dressing room. At 8:00 PM or so we ventured to the commons to warm up our dance. There were poms as far as the eye could see. We had no idea how we were going to be received. I remember gathering the kids around and telling them whatever happens, keep dancing. We were so different; we were prepared for either dead silence or random booing.

“Now taking the floor, Lamar Dance Theatre”

We jumped out on the floor for our run through. Ok, full disclosure here, this dance was not good. I’m not kidding you can go back and look at the tape. We had no formations to speak of; we knew nothing of gym space and size, spacing? What spacing? But when we hit that practice floor the whole place stopped. The balcony was full, and everybody in the place just stopped time. We finished and the next thing I knew the kids were surrounded and all we heard was “what time do you dance”. Ricky turned to me and said “This is going to be fun”. I’ll never forget that first time we danced on that practice floor and Klein Oak.

We were last, and when they opened the door and sent us in the gym. The place was packed. I heard a voice I would come to associate with one of the greatest moments I have had in my career. “Now taking the floor for our final routine, from the Houston Independent School District, Lamar High School, our final dance in the Coed division”.

I can’t describe what happened next. It was a thrill ride. A thrill ride I tell you. The reaction our kids got. I’ll just never forget it. I knew that for our guys, this was the first time that they had been successful and important, and not At Risk. We left Klein Oak that morning changed. The girls, having grown up in convention ballrooms had never dreamed of a reaction like that. The boys

realized that they had something that others wanted, and Ricky and I were swimming with possibilities of the future. From that day on, it was all about, what's next.

“Sharon, I gave him a 50.”

Later that week, we get a call from Marching Auxiliaries, and someone very pleasant asks if we are going to Nationals. Huh?! Nationals, what, where, and how much candy will we have to sell for that? She tells me that they don't have a Coed division at Nationals, but that we could enter the Open category. Ricky and I told the kids about the call, of course they were ready. Over the moon would be more accurate. I started looking at the financial possibilities, and at the same time, I knew we would have a grade report to contend with.

We got the money, I don't really remember how. Then D Day arrived. Grades! Cue scary music!

In those days, we had one big book of all kids' grades. All 3000. In one book. And every coach wanted that book. First. I camped out because I knew I was going to have to fight the baseball coach.

The boys always fought with their grades. And I knew that with the euphoria of Klein Oak, they had slacked off. And it showed. I went to an English teacher, who I knew, and asked about Adolfo's 50. She said “Sharon, he has a 32, I gave him a 50”. “Uh huh, I see”, thanks”.

So I had to go to the dance room and tell those kids that we were not going to nationals because 12 of the guys had gone ineligible. It was a devastating day.

But let me fast forward to one year later, we went to MA Nationals at UTSA; we won 1st in Coed, 1st in Large Ensemble, and 1st in Quartet. We danced at Sea World, were taped for TV, and judge Scott Grossman hired the boys to dance for him on CBS at the Miss Teen USA Pageant. Later that summer. Those guys never had grade trouble again.

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Part II

“Nuts and Bolts”

It's been 10 years since I added the boys to the dance program. I currently teach at another HISD campus, Westside High School. The setting is a little more suburban, but we very much have an inner city feel in our dance program. I teach four levels of dance and our hip-hop teacher, Rodrigo Leal teaches break and hip-hop.

Our Inertia Dance Company combines our most advanced dancers from both our classes. During the school day I teach the girls class, and Rodrigo teaches the boys class. Then we combine during after school rehearsal hours. We work independently, as well as together. Our choreographic process is also very collaborative. We have a pretty loose atmosphere during the rehearsal process. Oh, let me add that Drigo is a graduate of the Lamar Dance program, so I was his teacher “back in the day”. This helps, no doubt, with the cohesive process that our dances come together.

Dance at Westside offers students a Fine Art, PE, or general elective credit. I am certified for Fine Art and PE, Rodrigo is not certified, he works as a consultant, and I am the teacher of record for his classes. As the teacher of record it is my responsibility to monitor his classes throughout the year. I am always available to him, but he never needs it. I am lucky, we make a great team.

Inertia Dance Company members take at least one period of dance. And they have after school rehearsals, generally 4 to 8 hours a week. But this can increase during the busy competition/concert season. All dancers must remain passing by UIL; no pass no play, standards. Dancers must sign commitment and behavioral contracts, have insurance, and physical releases, as well as media and travel releases. All company members must agree to work as a team in rehearsals, performances, fundraising, and team tutorials. I'd like to note that the boys on our team have all the same requirements that we expect from the girls. All of our requirements are fully integrated. All company members must go through an audition process each spring. We begin work in August, 2 weeks before school starts. Apart from the competition season, Inertia performs in concert and invited performances throughout the school year.

Routines happen Daily

We offer 2 classes that are “boys only”. I need to note that TEA will not allow us to exclude girls from the classes; but the curriculum for these classes is very male oriented. I believe strongly in separating the boys and girls during training. The boys will work harder and be more adventurous if there are no girls around judging them. We occasionally have girls enroll in the boy's classes, but they

usually change classes because the movement is too muscular, or grounded. We do offer 2 classes of hip-hop, and the girls tend to gravitate in this direction. Like all dance, class begins with warm-up. Then they move into combinations and choreography, and they generally have the last 15 minutes or so to work on their freestyles. During class Rodrigo is the primary choreographer, but students are very much encouraged to participate in the process. Drigo and I are firm believers that dances mean more to the dancers themselves if they have had input in the process.

Puppies in a Box

We work hard around here, and we have high expectations. There is great tradition in our boys program. There is always much talk about who came before, and what they contributed. And how “now it’s my turn to carry that name”. Being respectful and humble is all part of the lesson. Our guys know they do not disrespect teachers, they don’t sag their pants, they are helpful when they don’t have to be, and they produce when it’s not expected. It is always important when we travel that we leave people talking about what we did on the floor, and not about something negative. I seldom even have to talk about this anymore, as this is part of tradition, and the guys pass this on between them.

I love the energy the boys bring to the dance room. It’s a surprise a minute. Now it can be like herding cats, or putting puppies in a box, but I love it. It is always unpredictable. And it is that unpredictability that allows me to produce my best work. Boys get into dance for very different reasons than girls. Girls generally come to dance for social reasons, because their friends dance, or because they want to be a part of something. Boys dance because there is something in them that makes them, that speaks to them. Their work is natural and organic. When we have coed rehearsals the girls will come in and sit and talk until I tell them to get up. Conversely the boys will come in, throw their bags on the floor, turn the music up loud, and getting to dancing. I know how they feel. They express themselves through movement. For many of them the dance room is the first place they ever felt successful, or had a positive male role model. A couple years ago we were tying our ties, and Man Dao, a senior at the time, said “you can tell the guys who don’t have dads; they do not know how to tie a tie”. I said to myself, this is it, this is what this program is about, this is why I do this...sure we dance and that is great and all, but it’s the opportunity to guide someone down a path they didn’t know they were on. That’s the reason. That’s the reason to practice at 9:00 at night. And to give up Sat, and maybe Sun.

Having Rodrigo here is the key. He provides that role model. He was just like them in school. He is a product of the program. He is 12 hours from graduating from UH. He is one of them, and they see they can do it too.

“Accidents happen”

It goes without saying that the boys make the girls better. Working with them makes them more adventurous and courageous. I think we have developed a good mix of bringing out the positives from both different methods and styles. Having the dance program was not really some grand design. It sort of an accident that happened. I feel so lucky to have found my niche. And to be able to still be inspired and creatively stimulated. Still...after all these years.

I am happy to see more and more guys dancing. Things are blowing up as the kids would say. Everywhere you look there is a movie or TV show or commercial featuring dance, and specifically men in dance. I look forward to seeing what is next.

FAQ's

Do you have problems traveling with boys and girls?

Honestly, not really. They do sign behavior contracts, and they do not want to get put on probation or worse. They love being in Inertia, and they do not want to jeopardize that.

Do you have boy girl drama?

Of course, because they are teenagers, it comes with the territory. But we do not allow couples on the team. If a couple does form in the course of the year. They are not allowed to travel together. One stays home, or one of them has to have their parent travel with them.

They are great friends, and for some reason they all tend to ask each other to prom...don't ask me why. I would think they would be sick of each other by then.

Do any of the guys dance after graduation?

Yes. I could brag and say a lot. So I will. In fact MTV's show "America's Best Dance Crew" held auditions in Houston last month and of the 4 crews they picked, 3 of them had graduates from Westside. And one crew is entirely dancers from Westside and Lamar. Dancers have gone one to work with Frankie J, Jennifer Lopez. Several did a performance tour in Russia and Greece this past fall.

Are the guys able to play sports and dance?

Its tough, just cause of the time commitment. So far the only success has been cross country and dance. Oh wait, we had a boy that played water polo a few years back.

How are your guys treated by the student body?

The Inertia guys are rock stars around here. Sometimes this goes to the head a little too much. But generally they are held in high regard. And really the jocks think these guys have it made.

We always have a lot of the baseball players at our Inertia concerts. I found this odd, so I asked one of them how come? He told me that coach required them to attend 1 fine arts event per semester, and Inertia had pretty girls dancing in tight costumes..."Miss Roberts that's a no brainer".

How does your principal feel about your program?

He likes it. He likes that kids are happy and productive. He knows a positive when he sees it. He is not into micro managing. He lets us work, and he trusts that we are going to make the school look good.

Do the girls get jealous?

Now this may surprise you, but no, not really. They know the score. But this is also something Rodrigo and work on. Keeping the balance. Everybody plays an important role in the process. Our success is a sum of parts.

Has anything terrible every happen?

Yes. A couple years ago one of the guys stole my master key, and used it to steal a computer. It was a devastating event. He went to jail, and didn't graduate. It took 4 months or so for me to talk to him. I didn't want the whole incident to define him...amends were made, he graduated, he works in a youth outreach program, and is currently dancing in HIStory.

What is the best thing that has happened?

Too many things to count. The guys being invited to perform on The Tony Danza Show in NYC. Getting recognized on a subway platform at Grand Central. Dancing for the Spurs during their championship run, and the guys meeting Eva Longoria. Or maybe it was senior William Tang getting a standing ovation for his choreography at the National Dance Gala in Chicago. That first coed dance at Klein Oak was pretty special. It was a lot of fun being in Miss Teen USA with NSYNC.

But probably, its every Senior Cap and Gown day...I cry every year.