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## January 2016 | Compassion, Cooperation, Creativity

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Teaching inner-city kids to embrace ethnic differences and personal growth through dance By Brian McCormick

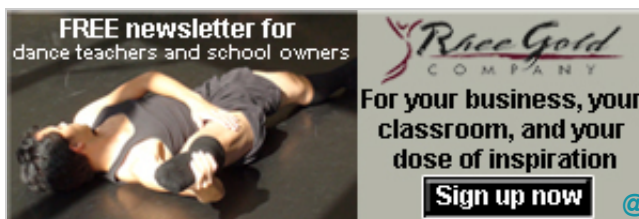
*Through its program of free dance classes, Dance to Unite brings its mission of compassion and cultural understanding to students in New York City with the help of volunteer guest artists such as Anri Nakano*



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(right). All photos courtesy Dance to Unite

# Teaching inner-city kids to embrace ethnic differences and personal growth through dance

**By Brian McCormick**

In New York City's Chinatown, they're studying hip-hop; in Brooklyn, they did Bollywood; in Harlem, they're learning Latin ballroom from a former ballet dancer who grew up in Taiwan; and in the Bronx, they're belly dancing. In a city known for its diversity, it's often difficult to bring different cultures together. But Dance to Unite, Inc., with its corps of dance volunteers, is teaching unity and celebrating difference through dance.

*It doesn't matter where we came from. We can all communicate with our bodies.*

— Ahn-Tuyet Nguyen

While she was a student at Queens College, Israeli-born Galit Adani volunteered as a dance teacher for Groove With Me, a youth development organization in Harlem that works to instill pride, leadership, cooperation, creativity, joy, and discipline in girls through free dance classes and performance opportunities. In 2009, after 11 years of volunteering, performing professionally, choreographing, teaching dance, and working with youth programs, Adani founded Dance to Unite, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization

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funded through board membership dues, gala fundraisers, individual donations, foundations (e.g., Assurant), and programs like AmazonSmile. She partners with afterschool programs to offer free dance classes with an educational component that celebrates cultural diversity. The program is designed to create positive experiences for children that help them develop understanding, acceptance, respect, and compassion for all cultures.



*Through its program of free dance classes, Dance to Unite brings its mission of compassion and cultural understanding to students in New York City with the help of volunteer guest artists such as Emily Anton.*

During the first year of operation, Adani was the only teacher. In the second year two more joined as volunteers. Currently there are eight volunteer teachers and eight teacher assistants. Now the program partners with seven New York City afterschool programs, social services programs, YMCAs, and children's services organizations, reaching about 200 kids a year in eight schools and community centers. Each class has one teacher and one assistant who teach either one or two dance styles to students, one day a week from

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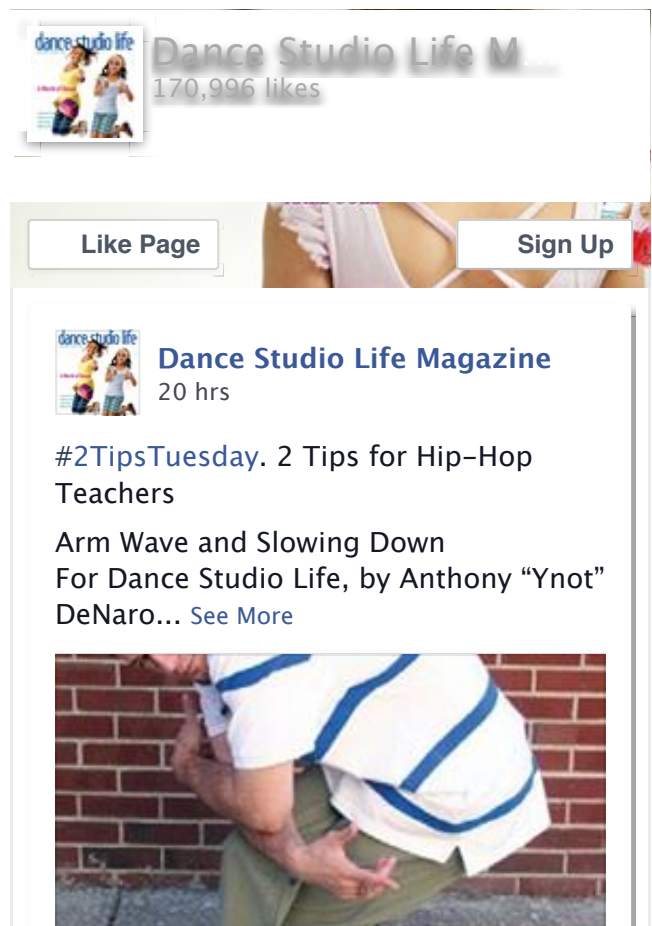
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October to June. At the end of the year, students perform the choreography they have learned for their community, and they pledge their unity by tracing their hands on a banner and writing their names inside the tracings.

All of the teachers are volunteers, brought together by Adani by word of mouth or by chance. Most are young, and many of them are college students who lack experience in teaching or teaching dance—but all of them are dancers. (The organization is still small enough for Adani to do one-on-one training workshops to support the teachers.) The curriculum and classes are determined by the teachers' skills and schedules, and currently include ballroom, belly dance, Bollywood, contemporary, fusion, hip-hop, jazz, kathak, lyrical, and “hip” yoga.

Classes are complemented once a year with guest artist-led workshops that promote the organization's mission of creating positive experiences for children to develop understanding and respect for all cultures, with a vision toward unity and peace. The workshops adhere to the concepts from the weekly classes by celebrating a specific culture through a dance style different from the styles being learned in class, visual art, music, or other art forms. Like the teachers, guests are volunteers recruited through Dance to Unite's small but surprisingly global network. Recent artists include Nicole Tongue, a former ballerina at England's Birmingham Royal Ballet; flamenco artist La Conja; martial artist Pam Roberts; henna artist Atif Toor; Israeli



### Dedicated to quality dance education

***Dance Studio Life*, a magazine with a back-to-basics approach, is a division of the Rhee Gold Company, whose mission is to be at the forefront of dance and education by promoting the highest possible standards in teaching.**

***Dance Studio Life* understands the soul of the teaching field.**

composer, musician, and performer Yula Be'eri; and Sikh cartoonist Vishavjit Singh.

"Dance is not the focus," Adani says, "it is a vehicle. The main goal is that at the end of the year students will view difference in a more positive way."



*Instructor Emily Anton leads students through technique classes as well as discussions about kindness, love, and peace.*

Toward this goal, classes open with a circle talk, in which the teacher and students discuss one of 13 positive concepts: Dance to Unite (the program and its mission), culture, unity, acceptance, compassion, respect, positive intention, giving, kindness, caring, bonding, love, and peace. Teacher guidelines developed by Adani emphasize how to embody these concepts through classroom practices, such as focusing on positive reinforcement rather than negative consequences.

After about five minutes of discussion, the students warm up and learn the choreography. But the concepts themselves aren't integrated into the dance. "We don't talk about



acceptance and then work on a phrase of choreography around acceptance,” says Adani, “but within the class structure we apply the process of the different concepts,” such as pointing out when the students show respect for each other’s different opinions or perspectives. “Of course, if the teacher can weave the concept of the day into the steps they’re teaching, that’s awesome.”

## The teachers

Vaishali Sinha began teaching for Dance to Unite in 2014. She trained in Indian classical dance (kathak) since the age of 5 and learned flamenco while her husband obtained a master’s degree in Spain. She had taught Bollywood for the Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Service, in New Haven, Connecticut, and Artists Striving to End Poverty, in New York City, before she discovered Dance to Unite while researching longer-term volunteer opportunities.

*When you start speaking about  
different cultures, it opens  
[children’s] horizons.*

— Mehrnosch Mirzaei-Reyes

Last year, Sinha taught kathak and Bollywood to fifth- through eighth-grade girls, mostly African American, at Achievement First Endeavor Middle School in Brooklyn, and is currently teaching these styles in the Bronx. At first she was “a bit scared,” she says, since the students had never heard of her dance styles, and then surprised by their acceptance after she gave them an orientation. “I was not expecting so much excitement with respect to

the dance styles,” she said, “but it was a perfect example of how positive attitude and atmosphere are important to support acceptance.”

After two or three months, Sinha says, she saw a marked difference in how the girls communicated with one another about respect and other concepts that had been introduced. She also found the girls making musical connections between the beats in Western Bollywood music and the music they listen to. “By the end of the year,” she said, “they’re singing a Bollywood song, and it’s not even in English.”

Belly dancing teacher Mehrnosch Mirzaei-Reyes, who was born in Iran and raised in Germany, has taught for Dance to Unite in Chinatown and the Bronx. She met Adani in 2013 after learning about the program online.

Mirzaei-Reyes sees a definitive change in students over time. “It’s not like the first class is a miracle; the first class is tough,” she says. “The kids are looking at you like ‘We’re no flower children.’ But after a while, you can see they’re connecting with dance, becoming more confident in how they carry themselves. And in the circle talk, they speak about things they might not be talking about at home; they’re not just talking about TV shows they watch. A lot of kids in that age group [fifth through eighth grade] are not aware that they might think in a negative way sometimes, which they learn at home or from their peers. When you start speaking about different cultures, it

opens their horizons.”



*Dance to Unite encourages students to celebrate the racial diversity within their schools and neighborhoods.*

Simone Johnson, a dance major at Hunter College who started with Dance to Unite as a teaching assistant in Brooklyn (Bollywood and kathak) and the Bronx (belly dancing), now teaches hip-hop to second-graders in Chinatown. She says there are big differences in the circle talk at various schools, but the concepts retain their universal application. “In Brooklyn we were working with a charter school, where they wore uniforms and had a lot of rules. The kids were very engaged, generally able to participate more, and a lot of them talked about other extracurricular activities. They showed great interest in learning about Bollywood and kathak and were comfortable talking about their fears.

“At the Bronx school,” Johnson says, “it was really different. There are two or three schools in the same building. The girls were not as interested in learning belly dancing—it’s something they’re not used to. We talked a lot about family issues, school, and things going on in the community, including police brutality.



But it still provides an opportunity to talk about how to view different cultures.”

“It doesn’t matter where we came from,” says Ahn-Tuyet Nguyen, president of Dance to Unite’s board of directors. “We can all communicate with our bodies. In the beginning there may be some resistance. But at the end, black kids want to perform to Israeli music, Chinese kids want to do hip-hop, and Latino kids want to dance to Indian music.” It’s a measure of unity that makes the concepts tangible, for the whole community to witness.

## The community

To choose school partners, Adani conducts intensive interviews with various nonprofits, promoting her program and explaining her criteria. “This is for low-income kids, kids who can’t have a dance class,” she explains. “The schools have to be inner city. They have to have the space insured, have our teachers fingerprinted, and provide transportation for our teachers. There also has to be someone from the school in each class. And we want to know the administration. How committed are they? How good is the communication? We need to be respected too.”

For three years, George Leung, director of youth services at Immigrant Social Services on Henry Street, has been in partnership with Dance to Unite at PS 2 and PS 42. “Ninety-eight percent of the kids at our schools are Asian,” Leung says. “They’re first generation and, especially at PS 2, mostly mainlanders. Their main focus is on academic success, and parents

are hesitant to have kids participate in afterschool programs if it interferes with homework.”



*A visit by former New York City ballet soloist Paul Boos (back row) gave students at PS 2 in Chinatown a welcome break from academics.*

Leung has to do a fair amount of outreach to get parental consent, including having notices translated. “It’s hard to get the parents to make that culture shift toward enrichment programs,” he says. “But especially with the first- and second-graders at PS 42, who have less difficult homework, this is a free dance program and parents want more of that.”

Jason Tomaszewski, program director of the Educational Alliance’s Boys & Girls Club at PS 140 (also on the Lower East Side), was introduced to Dance to Unite in 2013 through Adani’s sister Tal, who co-taught a yoga workshop for one of the Club’s programs.

“Our students are accustomed to learning hip-hop and step [African-based stepping],” Tomaszewski says. “Learning other styles of dance builds their self-confidence. They’ve done modern, creative movement, and yoga, and had a ballet workshop, and the classes

open up opportunities for them.” Participating in the program, he says, “helps with character development and maturity, and provides them with lessons to connect socially that will help them when they’re older.”

Leung sees positive effects of the program beyond the classroom, notable in the change in the parents’ viewpoints by the time they come to the year-end performance. There’s no question in his mind that unity is achieved through dance.

“Where else does an immigrant community come together to celebrate its children performing the dance moves of another culture?” Leung asks. “These are the moments I want the kids to remember, performing hip-hop in the middle of Henry Street for 500 people. The kids are smiling, the parents are happy. Galit has created a platform for kids to perform, and to come out of their shell.”

“Just because we live in the city doesn’t mean we know about the cultures and people around us,” Johnson says, “but Dance to Unite kids pass that barrier. What we do reflects a way of treating other people in the community. I’m African American and I’m teaching hip-hop with some stepping to students in Chinatown. I always think social change is personal change first.”

**For more information:**

 [Dance to Unite, Inc.](#)

**Brian McCormick** is assistant professor of media studies at The New School in NYC, and he runs the afterschool program at Baryshnikov Arts Center. In 2015 he joined the faculty of the Hollins University MFA in Dance program.

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