

Arriving and Thriving in the Journey: Mark McLeod on being a Teaching Artist and Education Liaison

By Talia Yellin Fisher



November 2018...For nine years, Mark McLeod has been a staple of the Dancing Classrooms Philly (DCP) Teaching Artist team. With a background in salsa dance, Mr. Mark's first memory of dancing was as a child of 7 or 8 in North Philadelphia, when his mother would ask him and his brothers and sisters to dance for the relatives who were visiting from out of town. His mom would put on a Motown record, "and we'd come down and line up, and there we'd go!" said Mark. "It's a fun memory." Mark learned salsa at a gym in the Mt. Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. "There were all sorts of dance opportunities there, but salsa spoke to me," he said. One day, the instructor couldn't teach a class, and the instructor asked Mark if he could take over. And so began Mark's passion for not only dancing, but teaching dance as well.

As a DCP Teaching Artist, Mark has encountered challenging moments, but also very rewarding ones. The goal of the DCP in-school residency is to foster a sense of joy and accomplishment that DCP believes every child should experience. DCP is also a social and emotional learning program that cultivates essential life skills in fifth and eighth grade students through the practice and performance of ballroom dance. The core values of respect, compassion, humor, and joy transform the "ballroom" into a safe space where all students can succeed. The journey of dancing together calls on, and improves, a range of behavioral skills.

Mark explains that there are different types of challenges to being a Teaching Artist, depending on the school. "There are challenges on both ends of the spectrum – at a high fidelity school, and at a school where the students are coming from some really rough backgrounds," he said. Mark discussed how sometimes there are schools where the students are coming from extremely difficult situations including foster homes, abusive situations, or from parents who are dealing with legal issues. "They are bringing a load with them to the school, a heavy negative load," Mark said. "How do you reach out to those students in what we're presenting with the journey – not just ballroom but in the social emotional journey? And at a high fidelity school, where they are already very faithful to the philosophy of the program, and they're already at a certain level, how do you take that journey and make it apply to them so that they're still engaged?"

One way that Mark accomplishes that goal with all students, regardless of background, is by finding ways for all students to participate, even if for some reason they cannot, or won't dance. Some of Mark's most rewarding moments as a Teaching Artist have been those times when he's been able to get

a student that “absolutely positively is not going to, will not be pushed, cannot be pulled, into this journey, *arrive* in the journey. And not only arrive, but *thrive*. And not only thrive, but be a candidate for and a participant in the competition,” he said. Mark told the story of a student last year who, from the beginning, hated ballroom dancing. “But I saw him grow through time, and in the end, he was asked, and he agreed, to be a participant in the team match. I think they won the silver medal, and that journey that he went through changed him. His grasp of the material was there, and his steps were sharp.”

And last year at another school, there were five students who were not participating in the dancing, and so instead they served as the DJs and also helped choose which students would represent the school in the competition. “They got together, they gave me a list of the dancers, and ranked them, for each dance for who they thought would be the best at representing the school,” he said. “So those were some times that made me feel very good not just about the journey for the people who were in the [dance] circle, but for those people who were outside the circle. They were part of the journey, but on a different road.”

This past summer, Mark had the opportunity to refresh and recharge his passion at a Global Teaching Artist Training in New York City. The participants came from Switzerland and from all over the United States. Most of the participants were new, with the exception of a few who had been through the training before, including Mark, who had done it about 9 years ago when he first joined DCP. “It was just so electric to be with all these people from all over for Dancing Classrooms,” said Mark. “I recommend it to any Teaching Artist who’s able to go after they’ve been teaching for a while, because you can see the program with such different eyes. It was great being there and going through it with a new perspective, and then picking up new ways of looking at and presenting the material.” One example of this for Mark was a re-introduction, or a reminder of what it’s like to be a 5th grader embarking on ballroom dance for the first time. “At the first DCP lesson, the inner circle holds out their hands and asks their teammate, ‘May I have this dance please?’ And the outside circle responds, ‘With pleasure,’” Mark said. “But when Mr. Rodney did it [Rodney Lopez, Co-Executive Director of Dancing Classrooms], it just seemed to have so much more of an impact on me, because he did it in a goofy way, kind of wide-eyed.” Mark explained how performing that ritual in a goofy way might help the 5th graders get over their nerves. “I think I had just gotten away from the fact that these are 5th graders. There is an atomic bomb going off in their head that they have to put their hands out! The New York visit brought me closer to that whole situation of them being 5th graders.”

Mark is also serving as a DCP Educational Liaison. The role of the Educational Liaison is to “look at what the TAs are doing, observe, participate, and then provide that TA with information that can help them improve,” said Mark. Mark explains that although it can be challenging to find anything to help an experienced and seasoned Teaching Artist improve, “I think about the advice that I’ve received from other Teaching Artists, and how now I can pass on that advice to someone else. It’s a chain of us improving each other.” Mark also participated this summer in the training for new DCP Teaching Artists. “So between that and the New York training, I got a double dose of the whole Dancing Classrooms philosophy and program, and that will also help me in my role as an Educational Liaison.”

In this coming year, Mark is most looking forward to taking what he got from his New York and Philadelphia training, and bringing that to his dancers. “I will try to keep those experiences uppermost in whatever challenges I come across.”

In addition to dancing, Mark enjoys reading and spending time with his two granddaughters.