

Teaching Artist Spotlight: Mr. David Heller



At a party in 1999, David Heller recalls seeing something unlike anything he'd ever seen: a man spinning on every part of his body — his head, back, hands, and knees. He taught David the “baby freeze” (a beginner break dancing move that requires balancing on your hands and head), and from that moment, David was hooked. His fascination with break dancing ignited a passion that would shape his career and eventually bring him to Dancing Classrooms Philly. One year after being introduced to breaking, he discovered the vibrant energy of the underground electronic dance music scene, where he learned more dance styles: tutting, liquid, popping, waving, and house. From there, he went on to run weekly electronic dance music nights and perform in dance battles. And then, after moving to Hawaii, he joined his first dance crew and taught his first hip-hop dance class. Despite his blossoming love of dance, David saw himself as a dedicated practitioner rather than a professional artist. But that quickly changed after he faced a significant setback — a back injury. “I almost gave up dance altogether,” he admitted. “The back injury put everything into perspective for me: I’m getting older and want to pursue my passion in life.” This realization fueled his determination, and he returned to dance with the intention to make it his profession.

At age 30, Heller decided to pursue a master’s degree in dance. Since his bachelor’s was in journalism, he was required to take undergraduate-level courses where he explored various dance styles. Although he did not resonate with every form he learned, his formal training helped him grow into a more proficient mover.

After graduating, David came to Philadelphia to pursue a doctorate in dance at Temple University, where he became the first person to research and write about liquid dance. While working on his dissertation, he met and befriended some of the highest-level liquid dancers in the world. His work has not only enriched his own understanding of dance and took him all over the world, but it has also made a significant impact on dance studies.

Also while studying at Temple, he was a Teaching Assistant for a class taught by DCP Teaching Artist Rhonda Moore. Rhonda quickly became David’s close friend and mentor, and she made the connection for him to teach DCP’s hip-hop program. While hip-hop-style moves remain his specialty, he was excited to be offered the opportunity to learn and teach ballroom. “I’m really happy about the journey that DCP has provided me. As an aging dancer, I wanted to get into partner dancing because I won’t be able to spin on my head forever,” he shared. “I had no ballroom experience, but [DCP Artistic and Education Director] Mr. Andrew and Ms. Rhonda kindly trained me. I ended up really gravitating towards it and enjoying it.”

Heller considers his work with DCP to be an important part of his life, and he never tires of watching students — especially in the ballroom program — transform from being very resistant to and intimidated by dance to confidently coming together, being more respectful, and enjoying themselves. “I’ll never forget the group of students I had last semester who were a particularly tough group [to engage] until about halfway in when they started to come around. On the last day, they gave me this whole stack of thank you cards, which I still have,” he shared, adding that one of the most heartwarming cards was from the student he found most difficult to reach. She wrote, “Dear Mr. David, at first I didn’t like you, but now I like you, and I like ballroom.”

Outside of DCP, David teaches dance at Temple University and has co-hosted Philadelphia’s first-ever liquid dance battle, which attracted dancers from all over the world. Additionally, he joined Musicopia and Dancing Classrooms Philly’s joint Board of Directors this year and is excited to leverage his connections and experience to help both organizations flourish. As an artist, he continues to immerse himself in the liquid dance culture and push boundaries in dance. He is developing his own unique style, a blend of liquid and breaking – which many dancers view as polar opposites.

Dancing Classrooms Philly’s impact on students would not be the same without talented and dedicated Teaching Artists like Mr. David. We are honored to have him on our teaching roster and Board!