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"It feels like freedom"

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TWU's Morgan reaches justice-involved youth through dance

June 13, 2023 – DENTON – Dance is innately creative. In addition to its artistry, it evokes emotions and perspectives, connections and cultural expressions.

Sometimes the creation is at a more fundamental level.

"I get to create who I want to be."

"It feels like freedom."

That's empowerment.

Ilana Morgan, PhD and associate professor in the Texas Woman's University division of dance, is providing the means for students to empower themselves on a whole other level. These are justice-involved youth.

In 2017, Morgan began the dance class on her own as outreach and research, working with girls ages 15-17 in a Denton County post-adjudication program called Courage to Change. The program takes place in a gym that is part of the Denton ISD Sparks campus, which operates as part of the Denton County Juvenile Detention Center.

Some youthful offenders, after going before a judge, enter the program, which is a six- to 12-month residential program housed near the jail and detention center on Woodrow Lane, south of McKinney Avenue in east Denton. The girls' delinquent conduct ranges from assault to theft to drug- and alcohol-related offenses. The group meets once a week.

"I've always been interested in the spaces in our communities in which people do not have access do not have access to arts, and why," Morgan said. "Who has access? What does it mean socially, politically?"

"I knew that there have been arts programs in prisons. I hadn't really thought about youth centers. I sat with the principal of the Sparks campus back in 2015, and it took me two years before I got access to the center. But we started talking and he was so excited about the arts. 'We'd love to have you, let's meet.' But I had to meet with counselors and the staff and really soften some concerns about sexuality of dance. 'What are you going to come in here and do? Is it going to be appropriate?' I had to meet in front of the board of judges, which was really interesting. So it took some time."

It got a boost with a \$5,000 Arts and Humanities Grant from the College of Arts and Sciences in 2020, was shut down by the pandemic, then was resurrected in fall 2022.

"Research shows us that arts participation helps with recovery and being able to interact with other people better and creating lives that we want to have, especially after leaving a center or a prison," Morgan said. "I'm really excited about this research because in dance education, we really have a gap when it comes to quantitative data. We talk about what we know to be true, our intuition, we see people bloom and blossom and we have a lot of research where people are talking about their experience, which is important, but in the arts we really need those hard numbers. So I'm hoping the survey in relationship to the interviews and also my observations with students in the center and the classes will really add to the field in a way that's important."

That research also piqued the interest of the National Endowment for the Arts, which late this spring awarded Morgan a research grant in the arts of \$35,000.

"How can dance-making and the creative process contribute to personal development, developing interpersonal skills, learning how to problem solve and work with other people?," Morgan said. "How do we help them develop those skills? For students that may have difficulty with reading and writing, this is a different way of self-expression and exploration that helps develop those skills."

The early returns are startling.

"I interviewed each girl after their last dance class before they exited the residential center. I asked them, what are you learning? Why should someone have a dance class and make dances? What was so exciting is they repeatedly said this is the only time that I get to create who I want to be in the center. I'm able to express something and be with people in a way that I've never done before. The girls were really talking about social, emotional skills and how to be with others.

"We had this moment a couple of weeks ago where I asked what did that feel like," Morgan said. "Because they really went for it when we danced the dance we were making, and it was better than they'd done before. One girl who's normally really quiet said, it feels like freedom, which I think really speaks to the heart of what we do in the creative process, especially in dance making, where we don't have to rely on words, and instead we focus on being with one another and expressing through the body. How can you create freedom in places where you're under surveillance and you don't have freedom? I think that's something that's really important to this work."

With the funding from the NEA, Morgan's class will be able to afford better audio equipment, as well as costumes, which may seem like window dressing but is of greater importance in this context. Morgan's students wear the same white t-shirt, khaki pants and white tennis shoes. Every single day.

Change – any change – is a big deal.

"This is a very restricted space," Morgan said. "To think about costuming and the meaning of a dance and how we're going to express it is exciting. To have the funds to support that is really great, rather than me seeing what I have at home, kind of shoestring."

That restricted space presents other problems for dance: the detention center is a no-touch facility.

"No staff, no student-to-students," Morgan said. "Not even a handshake. You never touch in this facility, which on one hand seems really sad. You're not going to get a hug for six months to a year. But on the other hand, there are a lot of youths in the center that live in a home, maybe, where the door doesn't lock at night, where there's food insecurity. Some have expressed to the staff that it's really nice to be someplace where there's no touching. So find ways to connect while making sure we keep 2-3 feet between us at all times. It's a bit of a challenge, but dance is able to meet that challenge."

The students will also have the opportunity to perform for others and to travel off the detention-center campus to the TWU campus.

"We're also able to fund bringing them here every semester to watch the DanceMakers concert, which just happened this spring. We had about 16 students. They're on a point behavior system, so they were only able to come if they had enough points. Most of them had not ever seen dance on a stage. Their questions were amazing. They were in awe. They got to do a tour of campus. Being able to ask questions about what it means to be a college student and how does one get here was really exciting for them."

They even got pizza.

A show, a campus tour, and pizza. Sounds like normal activities for teens.

So what's next for the program?

"We'll see what the data tells us," Morgan said. "There will be articles that I will publish out of this. I also am wondering about a possible publishing of, like, curriculum for justice-involved youth. I've edited and changed and developed the curriculum over time and the teaching practices that seem to work and are important for this population. So I'm curious about that.

"I hope to keep going as long as they'll let me and as long as I can have some funding that allows me to leave this building once a week and go do that. I think it's important for TWU and for Denton County to really think about what it means to serve in those spaces and not necessarily the spaces that are easy to access.

"Because these students are hungry for it. They're excited about it."

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