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TWU professor helps community through dance program

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Ilana Morgan, associate professor of dance at Texas Woman's University and Courage to Change dance instructor, has taught dance to students ages 15 to 17 at Denton County Juvenile Post Adjudication since 2017.

The Courage to Change program is a six to 12-month post-adjudication program run by Denton County which provides services for former juvenile offenders including counseling, physical education and secure housing, along with many other structured services. Once a week, Morgan teaches dance in the physical education class in the program.

"Our partnership with Dr. Morgan and TWU has been an invaluable resource that adds a new dimension to the services we offer," said Mindi Malcolm, Therapeutic Programs Coordinator at the post-adjudication facility and program facilitator. "By Dr. Morgan bringing dance into our residential treatment center, she is offering our youth an opportunity to learn new skills, both physically and emotionally."

Morgan's class promotes emotional health and helps develop skills like communication. Dance learning and dance-making help develop skills in collaboration and problem-solving. It teaches the students to interact with different people and to regulate their emotions in a healthy way.

The class doubles as a source for her research.

"I'm doing it because it's good for the community," Morgan said. "But I also interview the girls at the end of their time before they leave the program and ask

them about their dance experience and what they feel they learned."

Morgan advocates for art education to be spread throughout the community and believes that the resources for those to learn about art should be spread to those who would want to seek it.

"In our community, dance classes are often reserved for people that can afford it," Morgan said. "I'm from the belief that everyone deserves to have experiences of artistic expression, whatever that may be, and have access to it. I think that's what makes communities equitable and helps people become productive citizens when they're able to express themselves."

Morgan recently received a \$35,000 education grant from the National Endowment of the Arts, which covers pay for a research assistant along with supplies. She is using the grant to pay for the students in the Courage to Change program to tour Texas Women's University and watch dance performances at the university. It also allows Morgan to continue to write her research and publish it in the future.

Morgan has participants of the program take surveys during three different stages of the program — at the beginning of the program, at the middle stage and once the students complete the program. The surveys ask a variety of questions pertaining to the students' experiences and what they have learned.

"I've added the surveys because we don't have a lot of quantitative data in arts experience learning research, so to add that component can be really exciting and help for advocacy in the future," Morgan said. "Get it out there so you can replicate it. Advance it."

Through her career in dance, Morgan said that she's been able to work in a lot of different communities, advocating for arts education.

"When you're working in terms of advocacy and arts education, you're going places you haven't been before and you're teaching other people that are new and different than yourself," Morgan said.

Morgan's peers at TWU have seen the progress she has made with her weekly dance classes and research alongside being a professor.

"Dr. Morgan has been kind, generous, and so committed," Malcolm said "Many of our long-standing relationships with volunteers did not withstand the complicated times of COVID, but Dr. Morgan was eager and excited to return to our facility and teach dance as soon as it was safe to open the doors again."

Morgan's dedication has not only been seen through the Courage to Change program but also by those who work with her as a professor.

"Ilana is a wonderful colleague, she prioritizes kindness and generosity towards others, is a gifted teacher, and a great friend," Sarah Gamblin, TWU Dance Professor and choreographer, said.

Morgan said that the students who took her dance class described their "dance experiences as being able to create who they want to be in the world."

Featured Image: Professor Ilana Morgan poses in a TWU campus building on March 23, 2023. Alex Parker

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