



MAKING A DIFFERENCE THROUGH DANCE IN TWO VERY DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

BY ERWIN WASHINGTON

Lula inspires the students to take risks. Her high expectations build student self-confidence and allow them the opportunity to explore the different genres of dance. Through this expression of movement, the students have gained the ability to focus and discipline their bodies and minds.

–Joint Statement by 5th grade teachers at Newhall Elementary School.

Through the California Arts Council's (CAC) [Artists in Schools](#) (AIS) Program, the [Lula Washington Dance Theatre](#) (LWDT) is working effectively with youth in two drastically different educational environments – but having the same kind of results in both – oodles and oodles of success.

Lula Washington, the company's founder and Artistic Director, has been teaching 4th and 5th graders in the Santa Clarita Valley School District for the last three years. The Santa Clarita Valley has four different school districts and Lula has now taught in all of them. The schools have applied for CAC funding to bring her back again next year. Tamica Washington-Miller, Lula's daughter, and LWDT's Associate Director, has



been teaching 9th through 12th graders at Dorsey High School in South Los Angeles – also for the last three years. She has made a profound impact there.

During Lula's first year with the Santa Clarita Schools she taught choreography to students at two elementary schools. Students from each campus performed on stage with her during the dance company's public concert at the Santa Clarita Valley Performing Arts Center in 2010. Through her residency she teaches modern dance, ballet, African, hip hop, Katherine Dunham technique, and she pushes the students physically to go to their limits and to give their all. Her successes resulted in her being in demand all over the Santa Clarita Valley.

Lula's work in the community of Santa Clarita was the brainchild of Adam Philipson, Managing Director of the Santa Clarita Valley Performing Arts Center at College of the

Canyons. Philipson, booked Lula's critically acclaimed dance company for its 30th anniversary season adding a residency component with local schools. Afterwards Mr. Philipson commented, *Today I had the chance to be at two Saugus District schools and watch Lula Washington -- an award-winning choreographer -- work with more than 170 4th and 5th grade students. What an amazing opportunity for kids in our local schools.*



Teachers shared his enthusiasm. *It was an exhilarating experience to watch our 4th and 5th graders, boys and girls alike, express themselves so freely and joyfully through body movement.*

-Lisa Bloom, Director of Instruction, Castaic Union School District.

Tamica is a soloist and choreographer with LWDT. She has toured all over the world. When Lula Washington choreographed the film "Avatar," Tamica was director James Cameron's favorite dancer. He gave her a featured role as the body double for Mo'at, the queen mother of the Na'vi people on the world of Pandora. Tamica's dance residency took place at Dorsey High School, which is located just blocks from the LWDT studio – an area where the dance company is making a significant investment in community building.



In this South Los Angeles neighborhood, the company wanted to develop deep long-term relationships with young people, hoping that they might one day perform with the dance company. When Tamica got on campus, she found a troubling reality. She found that the process of learning dance technique and choreography was a form of therapy for the students. It was a means to develop their inner spirits and improve their life skills. Before the students could really dance, they had to take a good hard look at themselves, and to make a decision to not become a victim or a statistic. The dance company needed the students to build self-confidence and develop a work ethic for dance. The students also needed these same skills to help with their life challenges.

As a result of working with Tamica, many Dorsey students have gotten better grades, graduated, and enrolled in college. They study dance as a major, or continue to take dance classes as a hobby or a minor. Dance has become a positive part of their lives.



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The AIS grant enabled Tamica to teach dance classes on campus three days a week during the school day. She realized she had to do more than teach the subject of dance. She had to teach the kids about life. She began to talk to them about their plans. She connected dance to their goals, explaining that they would have to prepare and work hard to achieve their life goals, just like they would have to prepare and work hard to do well in dance. The students were captivated by her charisma and passion, and by her professional experience as a performer. Tamica and Lula both possess a passion for dance, and share the goal to use dance as a way to uplift children. Their enthusiasm is not always shared by education decision makers. The arts have been cut from many schools as a way to save money for academic courses. Many schools lack resources for the arts.

Needless to say, faculty, students, and staff at Dorsey and Santa Clarita Valley School District were happy with Tamica and Lula and want the company to keep coming back. LWDT just recently received a statewide grant from the James Irvine Foundation to partner with other communities in California. If you are interested, call Erwin Washington at, (323) 292-5852 or email at erwin.lwdt@gmail.com.



All photos of Santa Clarita Schools by Osofu "Sol" Washington. Dorsey Photo by Erwin Washington. Photo of young dancer by E. Mesiyah McGinnis.



Lula's commitment to the children through a standards-based program that reinforces the critical role the arts play in shaping a student's overall well-being was evident throughout the residency.

-Joan Lucid, Superintendent, Saugus Union School District.

The Lula Washington Dance Theatre receives funding from the California Arts Council's Artists in Schools Program, which supports residencies in schools, and is managed by Wayne Cook
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