Using Dance to Effect Change

Choreographer Rebecca Davis first visited Rwanda with a human rights delegation in 2008. Two years later, eager to use her own talents toward ending genocide, she and her dance company initiated their first ongoing international dance education project in Rwanda. Davis was originally skeptical that she could make a difference. "I thought, ‘I run a dance company. I choreograph ballets. What am I supposed to do to try to end mass atrocities?’" she says. "But that was my answer—if you’re good at something, the best way to effect change is to use your talents."

Today, the Rebecca Davis Dance Company has implemented dance programs paired with academic studies in Rwanda, Guinea and Bosnia and Herzegovina, aimed at reforming street children through dance. Participants in the program engage in a standardized dance curriculum (a hybrid of ballet and jazz, designed by Davis) while simultaneously enrolling in remedial training that varies, depending on the needs of each country (for example, technology, literacy, ethnic reconciliation).

At the heart of Davis’ dance curriculum is an intensive warm-up, allowing the kids to work off any pent-up energy. "I knew that the dance class needed to be physically demanding to engage them," she says. "A lot has to happen in that warm-up to get the kids in a position where they can digest information."

This October, Davis is bringing to Bosnia and Herzegovina her top dance instructors and students from previous programs. They’ll undergo a higher level of dance training and learn how the program is organized—so they’ll be able to build upon their own existing programs when they return home. She will also initiate a rotation of teachers, so that each has the opportunity to spend time in a fellow classmate’s country teaching to that demographic.

"People inside the dance community know how much power dance has to change the way people think," says Davis. "I’ll work with a street child who comes to the program just running around, screaming and hitting people. Six months later, I get to see that kid walk in and just start to stretch, or begin to teach the new kid tendus and first position. I get the joy of knowing that the child has totally reformed not only his approach to himself but also his opinion of himself."

—Rachel Rizzuto