

On the money: TranscenDANCE youth arts project

TranscenDANCE uses social issues as fuel for performances. Prime example: 'Uncommon Cents'

BY JANICE STEINBERG SPECIAL TO THE UNION-TRIBUNE

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED JULY 3, 2010 AT 7:38 P.M., UPDATED JULY 4, 2010 AT 12:02 A.M.

Housed in a storefront behind a heavy security gate, TranscenDANCE Youth Arts Project is a place you might easily miss when you drive down University Avenue east of Highway 15. But 5-year-old TranscenDANCE has gained visibility far beyond its City Heights neighborhood.

Led by Catherine (Cat) Corral, who has a background in dance, social work, and expressive arts therapy, TranscenDANCE is both a teen dance troupe and an activist organization.

The group creates a major dance-theater performance each year, focusing on social issues — for instance, money, the subject of “Uncommon Cents,” which debuts Friday at the Lyceum Theatre. The show explores everything from personal spending habits to the relationship between wealth and race, class, and gender.

Drawing on its members' individual and family stories, TranscenDANCE creates art of exceptional authenticity and depth, say the group's supporters — a list of heavy-hitters including UCSD ArtPower! director Marty Wollesen, the New York dance company Urban Bush Women and arts patron Danah Fayman.

For Wollesen, “I left (my first TranscenDANCE show) so energized and excited and thrilled that I had partaken of something really remarkable. The vibrancy of the energy was so palpable, and the questioning, the honesty and commitment were so right-there.”

Wollesen set up a fateful encounter between TranscenDANCE and Urban Bush Women, which built its international reputation making art about African-American women's lives. When the company



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The TranscenDANCE Youth Arts Project readies for its show at the Lyceum Theatre downtown.

TranscenDANCE Youth Arts Project in “Uncommon Cents”
When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday Where: Lyceum Theatre, Horton Plaza, downtown Tickets: \$10 to \$15 Phone: (619) 544-1000 Online: LyceumEvents.org (tickets); tDArts.org (information)



PHOTO BY SEAN M. HAFHEY

Dante Finch work out the kinks during rehearsal, as the TranscenDANCE Youth Arts Project readies for its show at the Lyceum Theatre downtown.

toured here in 2007, Wollesen arranged for them to do a workshop with TranscenDANCE youths at Hoover High School.

Paloma McGregor of Urban Bush Women recalls, "When we finished the workshop, the young people said, 'OK, that's great, but we have some stuff we'd like to share.' They started reading poems that were brilliant. They showed us a group dance that one of the teenagers had choreographed."

Urban Bush Women invited TranscenDANCE to their 10-day summer institute in New York that year. The group raised enough money to send six teens and two staff members, and despite being among 60 people, most of them adults, they "stole the show in the most positive ways," McGregor says.



PHOTO BY SEAN M. HAFHEY

Winnie Lailah S. Kilonzo works out the kinks during rehearsal.

In a relationship that continues to develop, TranscenDANCE sent another three teens with an adult chaperone to last summer's institute, held in [New Orleans](#), and four teens and an adult will attend this summer's institute, again in New Orleans.

While it's the TranscenDANCE teens who get up onstage, the group's original vision and staying power come from Corral — described by 16-year-old member Dante Finch as "this petite woman who's 4-foot-1 who's a bundle of energy, who lit me up."

Corral, who's actually 5 feet tall and punctuates her conversation with a big 6-foot laugh, grew up in [Los Angeles](#) in a family of performing artists. Her mother does Mexican-Spanish dance, and her father is a musician; they met performing on Olvera Street.

At the [University of California Santa Barbara](#), Corral followed her dual passions for dance and for helping young people, and after graduating in 1997, she took a job at [San Diego](#) Youth Services working with youth in foster care and adoptive families. But something was missing.

"There was a lot less healing going on than I would have liked," she says. "There was a real focus on trauma and problems as opposed to strengths and the joy and inner abundance that one has."

She studied expressive arts therapy and began to integrate movement into the groups she led for high-risk teens. "I saw something magical happen. ... Through the opportunity to self-express without words, there was a deeper place that I witnessed the youth tapping into and a joy and celebration they were able to express."

In 2003, she launched a pilot version of TranscenDANCE at a San Diego Youth Services drop-in center in City Heights and recruited participants via presentations at Hoover and Crawford high schools. Seventy-five teens signed up to audition. Teachers expressed amazement at the enthusiastic response to a program that didn't yet exist. Corral, however, wasn't surprised.

"There was something inside of me that was on fire, and I just knew that was what I was supposed to be doing," she says. "I only envisioned success."

Twelve students were selected, and the group created original dance productions and performed them throughout the country.

Fayman was on the San Diego Youth Services board, and she became the program's earliest champion.

"I was amazed at what they accomplished in their first year," Fayman says. When the pilot program ended in 2005, she met with Corral. "I said, 'If you want to keep this going, I'll help you.'" She's currently on the TranscendANCE advisory board and continues to be a major donor.

Corral started TranscendANCE under the nonprofit umbrella of Activist San Diego, a community organizing group also based in City Heights. Five years down the road, TranscendANCE has its own nonprofit status, an annual budget of \$100,000 and the University Avenue studio. Acquiring the studio in fall 2008 made it possible to offer drop-in classes, which are free to City Heights residents.

Members of the performing group are chosen based on annual spring auditions. "We throw out dance combinations, knowing this is all new for 99 percent of them, but how are they responding to it? What's the effort like? When they don't get something, how do they deal with it?" Corral says. Aspiring members are asked to take a serious look at whether they can commit to 10 hours a week of class and rehearsal, plus 40-50 performances, mostly at school assemblies, per year.

Soon after the auditions, the group goes on a weekend retreat. Members share their stories, which are sometimes wrenching, Corral says.

The City Heights neighborhood is economically disadvantaged yet culturally rich, with a large immigrant population. According to the 2000 census, City Heights had a median income of \$23,700, versus \$45,000 for the city of San Diego overall, and 70 percent of residents spoke a language other than English at home.

Of the 14 current TranscendANCE members, six were born outside the U.S., two in [Somalia](#) and one each in [Kenya](#), [Haiti](#), Mexico and Russia.

"A lot of stories reflect trauma and trials that take a resilient spirit to overcome," Corral says. "Our youths are often the first ones in their family breaking certain cycles, whether it be poverty or [alcoholism](#) or drug addiction."

Based on the retreat, the group finds a theme for that year's performance, and Corral works with partner organizations to help them delve into it. For "Uncommon Cents," an educator from Activist San Diego had them look at the politics of wealth, a trainer from Shakti Rising (a program that focuses on empowering young women) guided them to examine such things as family messages they've received around money, and someone from the financial literacy organization Mind Treasures coached them on tangible money management skills.

They also take dance movement classes in a variety of styles — ballet, modern dance, African dance, hip-hop and yoga.

"A lot of the early time is just learning the etiquette of being in a dance class," Corral says. "We're talking ballet with someone (Gerardo Gil from City Ballet of San Diego) who has very high standards."

When it comes to creating choreography and content, the teens take the lead in developing sections of the performance, with coaching from Corral.

"My job is holding space for everyone to ... find their voice, but also make sure there's deep intention going on, that it does connect back to the central theme," she says.

A number of graduates of the program also get involved as choreographers and performers, including Ronald Davis, 21, who's home for the summer from attending the University of the Arts in [Philadelphia](#) , and Sacara Northard, also 21, who just graduated with an A.A. in psychology from San Diego [City College](#) and plans to continue her education at National University

Davis had no training before joining the troupe at age 15 and now plans a career in dance. "Being in this troupe was not only a dance thing," he says. "It was a way for me to grow up and be a man."

For Northard, who wants to become an activist, "Doing the community projects and outreach made me feel whole."

Current troupe members echo their enthusiasm — for instance, Winnie Lailah S. Kilonzo, 19, who was born in Kenya, came to the U.S. five years ago, and now attends Grossmont College.

"About two years ago, I guess you could say my voice was taken from me, by being put down or told you can't do that," she says. "TranscenDANCE gave my voice back to me."

TranscenDANCE is in for some changes, since Corral is seven months pregnant with her first child, and she'll need to do more delegating. But she's not worried about the group's future. "Risk has always been a part of our journey."