

Gina Gibney Reaches Out



Bringing movement to survivors of domestic violence **By Nancy Alfaro**

Gina Gibney's long-time dream of bringing dance to the underserved became a vibrant reality eight years ago. Since 2000, her New York City-based company, Gina Gibney Dance, has partnered with Sanctuary for Families, Safe Horizon (2002), and Altria Group, to introduce creativity and movement to women and children who have survived domestic abuse.

In 1997, Gibney began searching for a community outreach program that would be a good match for her newly reformed all-female company and found an incredible fit within the domestic violence community.

Her dancers are women serving women (and children) and with the Domestic Violence Project, they bring artistic activity into a clinical setting. What they've learned in the process has strengthened them as teachers and made them more sensitive human beings.

Working with a changing group of ten to twenty women once or twice a month, the dancers conduct a class that includes a gentle warm-up, a creative movement component, and a "wellness activity," where breathing, stretching, and visualization exercises are performed in a safe space. The

Mariangela Lopez performs in *unbounded* by Gina Gibney.

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classes they conduct, says Gibney, “help the participants develop self-confidence, empower their choices, and show them that they will be listened to—that they matter.”

Associate director of community programs Mariangela Lopez elaborates: “I might ask the women to think about something they are proud of. One by one they start talking. As they talk, their bodies naturally respond. I bring that to their attention. ‘Look what you’re doing with your body. You’re embracing yourself,’ or ‘You’re reaching out.’ Then we start gathering the gestures, and little by little we create a phrase of movement. If I work with the same group a lot, we can develop a little further. They then have exposure to what choreography is like.”

The dancers don’t analyze the movement. “We’re not dance therapists,” points out Lopez, who has a BFA from The Boston Conservatory and is also a Laban Institute Certified Movement Analyst. “The goal is for them to be creative,” she says. “Creativity is a healing process.”



Courtney Drasner has worked with Gibney’s group for three and a half years. Like all of Gibney’s dancers, she completed a rigorous three-month training period with Sanctuary for Families (an organization that provides legal services and counseling to survivors) that included watching videos and attending lectures by social workers, police, shelter directors, and children’s specialists. She then shadowed more experienced teachers before teaching on her own.

Drasner, who has a BFA from NYU, feels that she’s matured and become a stronger dancer because of her community work. “I don’t think you ever get to a place where you feel like you’ve gotten this down,” she says. “You always have to pay attention and be sensitive to what the feeling is in the room.” She now understands that she can’t take it personally when her group’s attention drifts,

The all-female Gina Gibney Dance performs the work of its founder and artistic director (pictured above).





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**Lopez (above)
performed with
the company
from 2002-06
and is now
associate
director of
community
programs.**

or they refuse to participate. "You learn not to be upset if the session didn't go as well as you had anticipated. You get more confident, and hope that eventually you'll make a difference somehow."

Ultimately, the dancers agree the experience changes them as well. Not only has it influenced how they think about the value of non-technical movement, but it has also broadened their perspectives as human beings.

Lopez recalls that in the early days, she was hyper-sensitive to the sadness of the participants' situations. She's now become aware that she's working with human beings, who need to laugh, relax and loosen up. "People find joy when moving their bodies," she says.

"There is a lot of laughter in my classes."

When asked what advice she'd give to dancers who are interested in doing community work, Lopez says it's helpful to forget the teacher/student distinction. "I try to become one of them," she says, explaining that she often mirrors the women's body language when they speak. This helps participants feel less intimidated, and more able to express themselves within their own movement identity. "We as dancers come from a technical world, but we can't go with that structure to a community class," says Lopez. "The key to teaching these groups is listening. It's more important to touch base with them and realize that maybe your plan is not the right one for the day. You have to be ready to change gears."

When she first started teaching, Lopez was meticulous about writing out and planning her class, but now, she enters the room with a few ideas, assesses how the women are feeling, and chooses an activity accordingly. "If I had a





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dancers developed a set of "Take Care Cards," which offer tools for stress reduction, like foot soaking, breathing exercises, and meditation.

This kind of outreach work isn't for everyone. Gibney feels that working with domestic violence survivors has been successful for her company because it was such an appropriate choice. "Do a soul search regarding your process. Be honest about with whom and how you work best. Ask yourself, 'what did dance give me, why was it powerful enough to keep me in the field, despite all its challenges?' When you see what this art form brought you, it helps you think about who you can reach most effectively." ■

plan to have them close their eyes and the women in the room seem depressed, I do something more energetic, like shaking the body, or working with rhythm. That's part of how my method has changed," she says.

Over the past eight years, Gibney's group has done a lot of inquiry into how to be most effective, which has helped their work evolve. For instance, Gibney noticed the need to work with the survivors' children, as there are very few activities for them in shelters. And since shelter life is transitory (anywhere from one month to a year), Gibney felt it was imperative that the participants have information to take with them. In response, the



Photos by Anja Hitzelberger (upper); Andrzej Olejniczak; Courtney GGD

Courtney Drasner in Gibney's *The Distance Between Us*. At right: (r to l) Gibney, Lopez, Drasner.

