

AN OPEN LETTER FROM THE WOMEN OF GINA GIBNEY DANCE

Recently, while meeting at rehearsal, we were talking to Gina about the many experiences that we have accrued since beginning our work on the [Women at Work](#) project. As the conversation with Gina evolved, we realized that we wanted to share some of these happenings with those people who could help to ensure the continuation of this project -- and provide their support for its further development. It is with this in mind that we share these thoughts.

We have witnessed the immediate impact of our work in the shelters, both emotionally and physically. With every shelter visit, there are moments of elation and commonality for many of the women. One client, after a *Mommy and Me* class observed, "It's really important for me to come to this workshop, because it gives me a chance to play with my kid. We have so much going on in our lives...so much to deal with, that it's nice to have the reminder to stop and take time." Another client, during a workshop in Queens, told the rest of the participants, "Oh, it's so great to see all of you guys with such big smiles on your faces. That's so rare!" Women who are too shy and uncomfortable to participate on our first visit to the shelter gradually find their way into full involvement. At a Bronx shelter earlier this year, one reticent client had a major breakthrough. After weeks of watching from the side, she stepped into the movement circle and everyone cheered her bravery.

Our goal is to create an environment where women begin to rediscover their connection to their physical selves. At the end of one Spanish support group, a participant enthusiastically asked the workshop facilitator, "Can I take you home with me so you can teach me even more? I feel so light...as if I'm floating!" By using movement as a tool, some women have been able to access positive physical memories from the past. One client in Queens who described her body as "very dirty" began to remember her body from her childhood. As she did so, her movement became freer, and she began to feel an emotional release. Her body was no longer imprisoned by the moment of physical trauma. Responses like these are why we continue to feel the importance of our work and the deep desire to continue it.

Since last fall, we have had the pleasure of working with Safe Horizon, which has continued to amplify the trajectory of the *Women at Work* project. The added shelters have expanded the program to reach many more survivors, and have given the Company more opportunity in the field. Most importantly in this new association, the enthusiasm and organizational skills of the Safe Horizon support group leaders has created a stronger feeling of collaboration. This, in turn, affects the clients. We have found the women at the Safe Horizon shelters to be quite keen, open, and supportive of one another. They see our workshops as a chance to look inside themselves, let their hair down, and most importantly, to have fun. On several occasions, when the workshop came to an end, the women wanted to continue dancing...Let's call it *Dance Party – Safe Horizon!*

Of course, there are those days when clients' struggles create challenges to our work. We face the impediment of trying to get people physically moving through their depression, sadness, and resistance. We encounter roadblocks, such as lack of child-care, and we are confronted with obstacles within the agencies. However, we also experience, hope, encouragement and strength. Whether it is the smile of an overworked mom in a *Mommy and Me* class, the participation of a self-conscious teen,

or an insecure and shy woman finally stepping in to join a circle of dancers, we continue to be surprised and delighted by the survivors' courage.

As a company, we have found that our work in the shelters has provided us with the rare opportunity to enlist our skills as movers and teachers in our own neighborhoods. We have the chance to explore how our chosen method of expression, movement, can be fully utilized to touch people and provide a healing environment for those who have encountered trauma. As trained and educated artists, it is a wonderful feeling to be able to use our hard-earned skills and talents to generate income. We have worked long hours at other jobs in order to sustain our passion for dance and this program has enabled us to focus more on our creativity and our work in the field.

Through our involvement in this project, we have learned much about the recovery process of traumatized populations. We have been able to reach beyond the isolated world of concert dance and have taken our new skills into our communities. As far as we are concerned, there is no limit to what we might be able to accomplish with enough energy, support and access to the shelters. Clients have said at the end of workshops, "This is way too short! We need more!" We believe, where there is need, we are at the ready. As we continue to improve and deepen the *Women at Work* project, we, the Gina Gibney Dance Company believe that your support of this project will provide so much for so many people.

Gina Gibney Dance
2004