



Ask most graduating dance majors

what the highlight of their college years was, and they will likely recall a shining moment onstage or a master class with a favorite icon. Ask Jordan Peterson, a 2013 graduate from the Department of Modern Dance at the University of Utah, however, and she will cite dancing with children in a hot, humid room after days of little sleep. The setting: an orphanage in Panama City.

The orphanage was one of three at which Peterson and her fellow students taught classes in creative movement as part of a nine-day service-learning trip in March. "The experience will stay with me for a long, long time," says Peterson. "It went so much deeper than showing these children how to plié or run in 3/4 time. It meant the world to them just for us to pick them up and learn their names."



ABOVE: Some of the important resources the Utah dancers provided for the orphans were fun, affection, and attention.

OPPOSITE: Teaching in Panama underscored the need to take advantage of different learning styles, including auditory, musical, and a hands-on approach.

Dancers Without Borders

Discovering the power of dance service in Panama

By Bonner Odell

A meeting of minds

The rapid pace at which the students bonded with the orphans did not surprise University of Utah assistant professor Juan Carlos Claudio. He had taken a group of university dancers to Panama the year before.

"Dance is a universal language," says Claudio, a native Spanish-speaker originally from Puerto Rico. "It breaks barriers of language, culture, and color. The experience changes the students. They go with the goal of being the best teachers possible. By the end of the trip they realize it is not so much about the lessons as about being fully present and engaged with these kids."

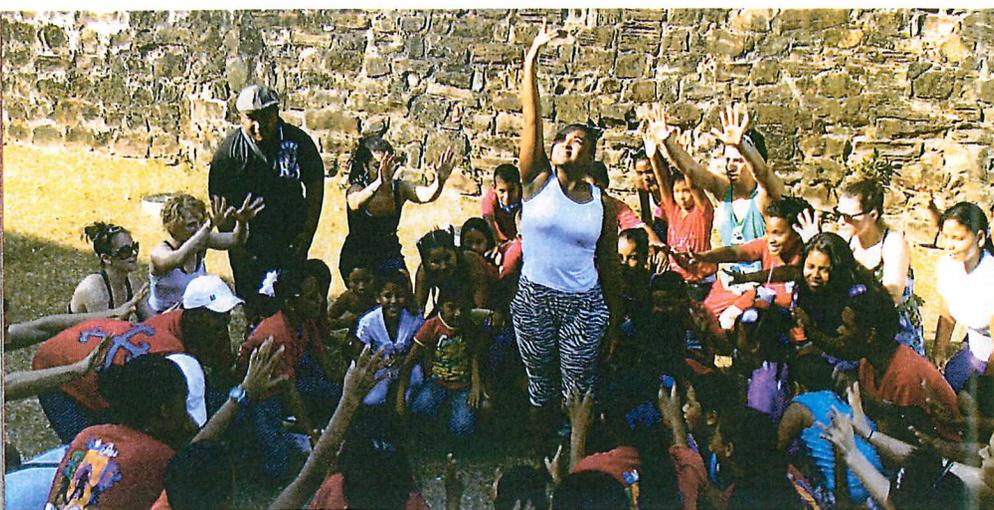
For Claudio, watching his students rise to the challenges of teaching in a foreign culture—to students who in most cases didn't speak their language—filled him with pride and

satisfaction. Prior to joining the University of Utah faculty, Claudio danced for 10 years with Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company, which incorporates service through dance.

One of Claudio's chief goals as a professor is to expose his students to the potential of dance to make a difference in society. He teaches courses such as Service-Learning Modern Dance, and Dance and Community. He has also fostered partnerships with local schools and a refugee center where dance students can put the pedagogy they are learning into action. But spotting a flyer on a campus bulletin board for an organization called Movement Exchange was the turning point that would make it possible for Claudio to take a core group of his students from exposure to transformation.

Like Claudio, Movement Exchange founder Anna

This page and opposite photos by Benjamin Pfeiffer



Children from Panama City orphanages bonded quickly with University of Utah students. Below: Some of the children were delighted to encounter electronic gadgetry like video cameras, cell phones, and Juan Carlos Claudio's laptop computer.

Pasternak knows firsthand the power of dance to affect disadvantaged communities. After graduating from Harvard, where she studied dance and ethnography, she traveled throughout Latin America with organizations that provide housing and medical care. In each country she searched out opportunities to pursue dance, which she says opened doors to relationships she couldn't have formed otherwise, especially in places like Brazil, where she didn't speak the language.

While serving in Panama, Pasternak hatched an idea that would marry her passions for dance, travel, and volunteerism. "I encountered so many people who had come to build houses and clinics," she says, "and I thought, how come nothing like this exists for dancers? Where is Dancers without Borders?"

Pasternak's answer to that question is Movement Exchange, which she formed in 2010. The nonprofit's mission: to foster "cross-cultural understanding, self-confidence, leadership, and community building through movement and service." Pasternak and her small team of mostly volunteer staff plan trips to Panama for college dance groups, dance studios, dance companies, and individuals through Open Call, an option available to high-school-aged dancers. Participants take master classes,



teach, and take in the local culture on side trips. Pasternak hopes to expand the exchanges to Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, and India.

The orphanages at the heart of Movement Exchange's outreach efforts house 60 to 100 children each. Most of the children are Afro-Panamanian or indigenous and come to the centers as infants. Some get dropped off on the highway; others are victims of child abuse who have been removed from their homes. There is a high rate of HIV among the children, many of whose parents have died of AIDS or cannot afford antiretroviral drugs.

Although the orphans receive access to health care, food, clothing, education, and housing (they live 25 to a house), Pasternak says one thing they do not get enough of is attention. "The college receive access to health care, food, clothing, education, and housing (they live 25 to a house), Pasternak says one thing they do not get enough of is attention. "The college students find out fast that no matter how well the dance lesson goes, it makes all the difference just to have been there and had fun with these kids," she says. "Dance teaches [the children] to collaborate, problem solve, and express themselves. They gain self-esteem. It's a hard thing to quantify, but it's undeniable."

Pasternak says she relies on anecdotes to convey the impact of the work to outsiders. She recalls one girl's comment: "You know what I love about dance? When I'm doing it I'm not thinking about anything else." Pasternak's

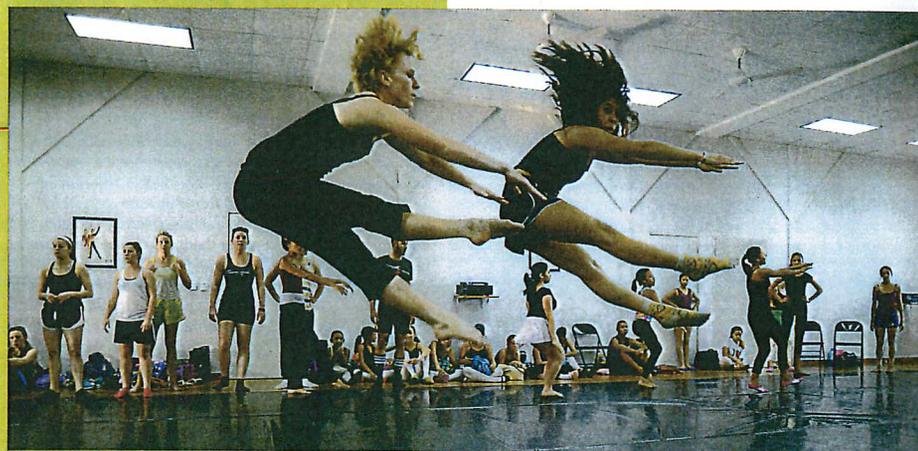
reply: "That's what I love about dance too!"

The best-laid plans

For the Utah students, preparing for the trip took months. First they had to make it through a competitive application process overseen by Claudio, who chose 15 out of the 25 applicants based on their service experience and demonstrated commitment. (The exhausting schedule, heat and humidity, and humble accommodations are not for the faint of heart.) Those chosen then began the task of fundraising. They wrote grants, sent donation letters, partnered with local businesses, and staged performance benefits to raise the roughly \$1,800 per student for air-



Above: Juan Carlos Claudio counseled University of Utah students to be flexible and fully engaged with the children they worked with in Panama City orphanages.



Top and middle photos by Benjamin Mielles; University of Utah, Department of Modern Dance; bottom photo courtesy of University of Utah, Department of Modern Dance

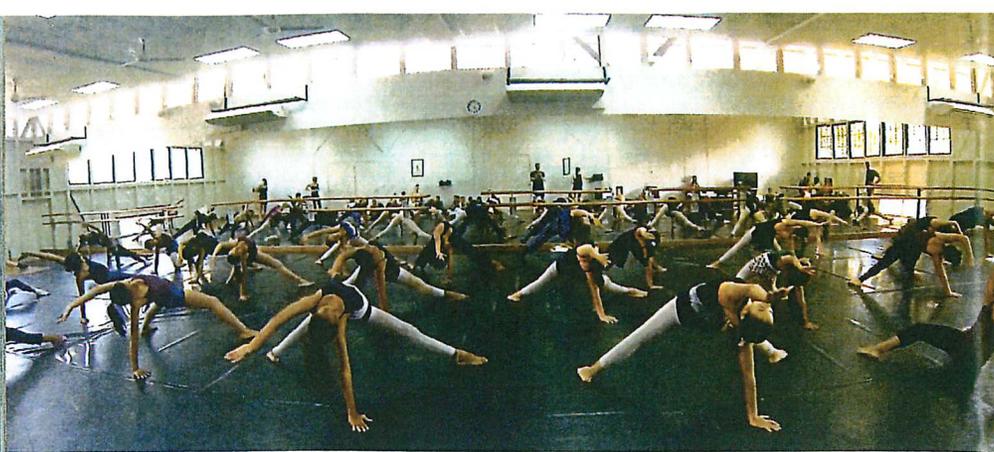
fare, food, and program fees.

Next came the lesson planning. The emerging teachers taught themselves dance terms in Spanish and tried to anticipate how to use body language to communicate their intent. One advantage discovered by the previous year's volunteers: Panamanians tend to have excellent rhythm. "We found that we just had to get them moving, whether or not they could execute the movement or phrasing we were after," says returning student Aiko Johnson. "As prepared as we were, there were certain things we just couldn't get across, like how to do a modern contraction or certain leaps or turns."

When a lesson plan was not hitting the mark, the teachers were not afraid to improvise. They played games like "Human Obstacle Course," making bridges and tunnels with their bodies, and "Te Reto" (I Challenge You),

Above: The Utah students taught modern technique classes at Escuela Nacional de Danza. Below: Flexibility in following lesson plans often led to games involving activities like forming bridges and tunnels with bodies.





Students from Escuela Nacional de Danza proved remarkably open to new dance experiences like those gained in Scotty Hardwig's modern class. Below: Following their Movement Exchange experiences, many participants choose to pursue careers in education.

performing movements in the middle of a circle and challenging the students to copy them or "one-up" the teacher.

One group of children became preoccupied with the instruments, so the dancers worked with them to create a sound score incorporating foot stomping, clapping, and singing.

For those Utah students who plan to pursue teaching after graduation, the experience was a lesson in staying responsive. "It sounds naïve," says Peterson, "but I learned that my technical training was not as important as I thought. Being a teacher is not all about what you can do. I saw that in a classroom or studio setting you are going to come across so many learning styles: auditory, musical, hands-on. I realized I needed to restructure my teaching philosophy to be more all-encompassing."

As for the orphans, their encounters with the Americans offered a window into the world outside of Panama City. Claudio tells the story of one University of Utah student who brought his video camera to document the classes. The children had never seen anything like it. He let them borrow the camera, shoot footage, and view what they filmed on his laptop.

"You could see the light going on in their eyes," Claudio says. "They were amazed to learn there are people who have jobs using this apparatus. Many of the kids have no basic knowledge about the outside world. Some don't

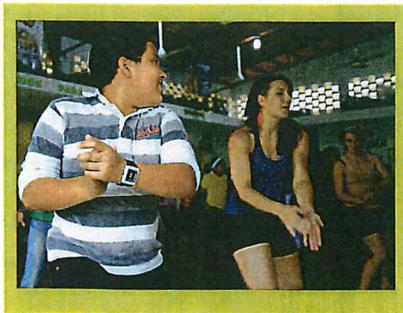
even know there is such a thing as an airplane."

But the children weren't looking only for the opportunity to play with new gadgets. Says Peterson of one class at an all-boys orphanage, "Juan Carlos told us ahead of time they would be curious about our cell phones, cameras, and sunglasses. When we got there, several of the youngest boys kept asking us something in Spanish. I assumed they wanted to look at our things. It turned out they were asking for hugs."

A highlight of the trip for all involved was a flash mob performed by roughly 60 of the orphans and their American cohorts. Organized in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy in celebration of Women's History Month, the dance broke out at a popular shopping mall to Alicia Keys' hit song "Girl on Fire." The surrounding shoppers watched in delight and some even joined in. A national news network filmed the event, which was broadcast across Panama.

Higher ed across hemispheres

The Utah dancers furthered their own dance studies by taking morning classes at the University of Panama and afternoon classes at the prestigious Escuela Nacional de Danza (National School of Dance). They also taught classes, including choreography, improvisation, and partnering at the University and modern technique at both schools.



Top photo courtesy University of Utah, Department of Modern Dance; bottom photo by Benjamin Mielke

"There were about 60 students in the National School of Dance classes," says Johnson, "most of them in pink tights and buns. We were bringing something brand-new to them, but they weren't afraid to go for anything. They picked up the movement really fast and were eager for whatever we threw at them."

The curriculum at the University of Panama focuses on Panamanian Folklorico dance. Since classes were held at a university, Peterson pictured a big studio, but "what they had was a tiny room with wrinkly marley and a dirty mirror. Yet these dancers were so passionate and grateful to be there. It reminded me how much we have at the University of Utah, but also that nice facilities don't make a dancer any more dedicated to her art."

Reverberating impact

The benefits of the exchange don't end when the volunteers return home each year. The dancers keep up with their Panamanian friends on Facebook and share resources like class music. Some of the Panama students are even planning to study at the University of Utah. As Claudio puts it, "Words can't describe the depth of the exchange in terms of ideas and approaches to teaching."

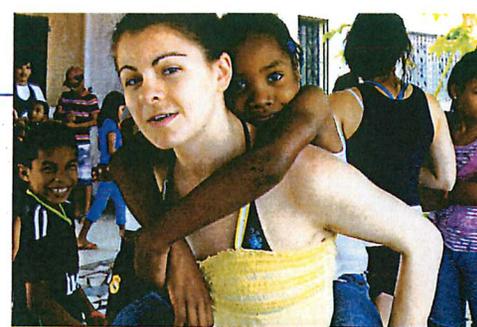
The children at the orphanages write letters to their American pals, who send the children gifts and supplies. But perhaps the best present the Utah students give the orphans is access to continuing dance classes. Included in the Movement Exchange registration costs are fees which pay for local dance artists—one of them a student at the University of Panama—to teach one to two classes a week at the orphanages throughout the year. The fees also pay for the children to attend professional dance performances.

As deeply as the trips affect the orphans, Pasternak says, it may be the college students who are most changed by the experience. "It is unexplainable the number of letters I get from people who decide to go into education after these trips, whether or not they stay in dance," she says. "Once they get home it's impossible for them to remain inactive or apathetic. It's the same with the University of Panama students who see the U.S. dancers coming here to do this work. Sometimes you have to experience what it's like to make a difference to believe that it's possible."

Upon their return, the Utah volunteers gave an emotional presentation to nearly 200 fellow students in the dance department, including a five-minute documentary with footage from the classes, flash mob, and side trips (see video link in sidebar).

"It was nice to get to know my fellow students in a different way than we know each other at the university," Peterson says. "We are from different backgrounds and dance styles, but any preconceptions we had of one another were shattered in Panama. Now it's like we share this wonderful secret. We can look each other in the eye and know we all experienced the same thing. We thought we were going there to teach, but we definitely went there to learn." ↵

Top photo by Benjamin Mielke; bottom photo courtesy University of Utah, Department of Modern Dance



The Exchange in Action

To view a short documentary of the trip, visit YouTube and search "Movement Exchange March 2013."

To view the flash mob, visit YouTube and search "Wow Embajada de EEUU" ("Wow U.S. Embassy").



How to Get Involved

If you'd like your studio to participate in providing dance to at-risk youth in Latin America, here's how:

- Movement Exchange customizes international exchanges for studio groups.
- Individual studio staff and high-school-aged dancers can join Open Call exchanges.
- Studios can adopt a dance program in a disadvantaged community for six months or longer. Your students can learn the power of dance as service by staging performance benefits and hosting fundraisers, and exchange photos and letters with sponsored youth.

For more information, visit movementexchanges.org.