

Dancing for Their Lives

Modest Keshet Dance Company gets bragging rights

BY ERIN ADAIR-HODGES

Working in the field of nonprofit arts education, while always noble, is often difficult. There's the grant writing, the scrambling for funds and, some days, the wondering if anything you do really makes a difference. Those are the bad days.

And then there are the times when it's not just you who knows that this work is vital, but others too, and you're recognized for it. Recognized by, oh, let's say, First Lady Michelle Obama. That is a good day.

Keshet Dance Company Founder and Artistic Director Shira Greenberg recently had a great day. Representing her company, Greenberg flew to Washington, D.C., to receive the Coming Up Taller award for excellence in arts education from Ms. Obama on Nov. 4. It's the highest honor of its kind in the country, and it went to 15 American and four international groups this year.

Keshet was recognized for its Outreach Program With Incarcerated Youth and its affiliate Post-Release Program, both done through the Youth Diagnostic and Development Center (YDDC). The Outreach Program, according to Greenberg, teaches "math skills, literacy skills and conflict-resolution skills through dance." Participants in the program receive school credit for these classes, which are structured according to state curriculum standards.

The professional dancers of Keshet also introduce students to a variety of dance styles, including modern, ballet, tango, salsa and capoeira. "It's really cool to see these teenage boys who are incarcerated do ballet class, and really doing a good job and being excited about it," Greenberg says. "It really connects them to their bodies, to each other and to their energy in a different way."

The Post-Release Program continues to work with some of these young people after they've been paroled, with mentors from Keshet following them through their reintegration. Greenberg says the two programs have had phenomenal success. Students who participate improve their math and literacy skills by between 50 and 85 percent. Compared to other incarcerated youth, conflicts go down by 15 to 20 percent. And perhaps most telling, there is a zero percent recidivism rate for those who have been in the Post-Release Program.

To Greenberg, that success is borne out of establishing and maintaining a sense of trust. Usually when young adults are released from detention, she says, they're given a whole new group of councilors, case workers and parole officers. For someone who's been in the system since 12 or 13 years old, that transition can be jarring, or worse. "That's



Keshet's Shira Greenberg and Elianna Boswell pose with First Lady Michelle Obama at the Coming Up Taller awards.

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your whole support system," Greenberg says. "That's everyone you know. So you have kids already with trust issues and you pull everyone away and say, Go back into society and do a good job." The problem comes when, she says, "You don't know anybody and you don't have anyone you can trust and say, What's really happening here?"

What Keshet does for those transitioning back into society is function as a constant presence, a sounding board and an advocate. Its members have helped with job and college applications, and they've even gone shopping with participants for outfits to wear on interviews. "It's way beyond dance," says Greenberg proudly.

One of the outcomes Greenberg hopes transpires as a result of the Coming Up Taller award is increased funding. The YDDC serves the entire state, and Keshet's program needs monetary support so that staff may continue to assist the young men and women who return to their homes across New Mexico. "We never leave a kid who's been in the program without a mentor."

One of these "kids" is 18-year-old Indie C., who accompanied Greenberg to D.C. to receive the award. Incarcerated at 13 for murder, Indie is now working to become a nurse, thanks in large part to the work of Keshet. In a press release, Indie describes the dance troupe as "like a family that a lot of kids in jail never had. They accept you and love you however you are."

Greenberg says Indie was blown away by what she saw and learned in the capitol. However, two days before they were to go to the White House, they were informed that the Secret Service had decided that, due to her record, Indie would not be allowed to attend the award ceremony. Though Greenberg describes Indie's response as absolutely gracious, the mentor was upset. "It was really unfortunate, because that is the point of the program. Everyone in the program has a record, which is why we're doing it."

"I don't know if it was harder for me or for her," Greenberg reflects. "She understands she committed a crime and there's

consequences. For me it was hard because she's the ultimate success story. She's in nursing school now. She's amazing. She's this really incredible, incredible person."

Luckily, Greenberg was able to bend the ear of Representative Keith Ellison, a congressperson from her home state of Minnesota and a man particularly interested in juvenile justice issues. After trying unsuccessfully to reverse the Secret Service's decision, he took Indie on a private tour of the capitol, telling her, according to Greenberg, "This will change with you; we're not going to let this happen again."

Standing in Indie's stead was Elianna Boswell, a participant in Keshet's Pre-Professional Program. The 15-year-old Albuquerque Academy student flew out at the last minute to represent the students of Keshet's arts education programs. This was especially meaningful for Elianna, as she had worked diligently on the Obama campaign, up to 30 hours a week during election season. "For her to turn this around and a year later be in the White House with the first lady was very exciting."

As far as how meeting the first lady went, Greenberg cannot use the word "amazing" enough. "She is incredibly inspirational and kind and down to earth. And, gah, tall. But so so nice, and genuine," Greenberg says Obama was highly engaged with all of the participants, perhaps because of her particular commitment to the importance of what the award is meant to recognize. "It was so heartfelt. She is a huge supporter of how important the arts are in everybody's lives."

Greenberg says that to be surrounded by so many wonderful people, along with a portrait of Lincoln and the desk at which he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, was exhilarating. Even Michelle Obama seemed wrapped up in it, saying "That was fun. Let's do it again." ☺

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