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arts on the hill

The cultural experience of our neighborhood is world renowned, and getting more exciting all the time.

Reaches Out

by Kate Hanley

alking past the modern white building at 3
Lafayette Avenue that houses the Mark Morris Dance Group, you might wonder what happens inside those walls besides occasional performances that would give you a chance to peer out one of its many windows, or linger on one of the trellised decks. The answer is, plenty. Being an active and welcoming member of the surrounding



community is a top priority for the company—perhaps the result of spending its first 20 years as a touring company with no home to call its own.

In the late 1990s, when it came time for the company to put down roots, the diversity and the existing cultural offerings (including BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) and MoCADA (Museum of Contemporary African Diaspora Art) of Fort Greene attracted MMDG, but they were ner-

vous about making the move to Brooklyn. "We didn't want to be perceived as a Manhattan company invading the neighborhood," says Nancy Umanoff, executive director of Mark Morris Dance Group. To make their commitment to being a good neighbor clear, they selected a derelict building to rehab and transformed it into a light and airy headquarters that helps visually solidify Fort Greene's status as a cultural center to anyone driving down Flatbush Avenue. They also invited every arts organization they could find in Brooklyn to lunch, presented their plans for the space and asked them what they needed. "What we heard is that people needed affordable rehearsal spaces," Umanoff recalls, so they instituted a subsidized studio rental program for local organizations that they still operate today, leasing space for 6,000 hours every year at a reduced rate.

But the cornerstone of the Dance Group's interaction with the community is education—all of it affordable and approachable even to those of us with two left feet, and a lot of it free. The center itself offers numerous weekly classes to all populations-from four-year-olds to seniors. The curriculum is based on Morris's childhood experience, where he was introduced to a wide range of music and dance through the public schools. "We see ourselves as a neighborhood school where kids and adults can go and try different things and feel safe, not a formal dance conservatory," Umanoff says. "Our primary goal with the school is to enrich kids' lives by exposing them to the arts in a safe and engaging way. We also want to ensure a future audience for the arts-in the same way that you don't grow up to be a season ticket holder for the Yankees if you never played baseball as a kid, you won't be interested in the arts as an adult if you never had any direct interactions

with them as a kid."

Kids' classes have a five-month semester and cost just over \$200, with offerings that include creative dance, ballet, modern dance, hiphop, tap, and singing. There are currently 900 kids taking classes each semester (up from 125 when the school first opened in 2001). For adults, the offerings are even more varied, including several forms of dance as well as pilates, yoga, and zumba. (My husband and I took a series of Pilates classes here in the spring of 2007; the world famous Bob, a popular burlesque dancer, made the class even more satisfying.) Adult classes are \$13 a session (a few dollars less than the typical yoga class), and the per-class cost goes down if you purchase a class card.

To serve members of the community who may not be able to afford classes at the school, MMDG raises funds and devotes staff to several outreach projects: they teach weekly classes for kids and seniors at

local community centers in partnership with the NY City Housing Authority. The company also sends dance teachers to work with individual Brooklyn schools under the Dance, Music and Literacy program, which teaches children an evening-length work choreographed by Mark Morris that is based on music

by Handel, poems by John Milton,

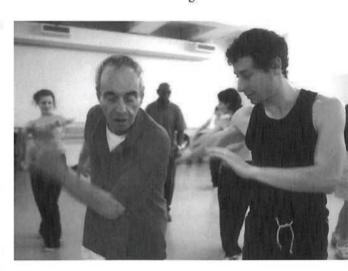
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and works of art by William Blake, "so that the kids are introduced to a wide swath of the arts and they can see how the different disciplines inspire each other," Umanoff says. At the end of the semester, the kids perform portions of the original dance and pieces that they choreographed themselves with members of the dance company. "We have a waiting list of schools who are hoping to participate in the program. Obviously, we can't serve everyone all at once, but we keep fundraising and hopefully someday we will."

The biggest outreach program

that the company spearheads is Dance for PD - a special program for people with Parkinson's disease produced in partnership with the Brooklyn Parkinson's Group. Each week, sixty local residents who have Parkinson's, or who take care of someone who does, come to the center for free classes that teach them how to get their minds and bodies communicating with each other and lift their mood. What started as a class of six or seven people in a local library in 2001 is now replicated in cities across the country, as well as in the UK and Toronto. "This program is really taking off," Umanoff says. "We've presented our results to several medical groups and have begun offering workshops to train other teachers so that the program can continue to grow well beyond our home base in Brooklyn."

Although the company has been in existence since 1980, it was only after building a home for itself



in Fort Greene in 2001 that its philanthropic ideals could blossom into a robust entity that has a big impact around the world as well as right here in the local environs—a transformation that Umanoff credits Fort Greene for inspiring. "One of the wonderful things about Ft. Greene is that it's truly a neighborhood, and despite the influx of new businesses and residents that has happened over the last few years, the original character of the neighborhood is still there, loud and clear—there are no chain stores, the population is very diverse, and it's a rich cultural district," Umanoff says. "The character of the community is very welcoming and it's exciting to be a part of it and be able to give back to."

Kate Hanley lives in the Graham Home for Old Ladies and covers wellness for several national magazines. She's also the author of The Anywhere, Anytime Chill Guide.