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Ballet and Books™ Service Learning and Leadership: a community-based dance and literacy program for children

Introduction

In my room there is a faded photograph of me at three years old, instructing dolls in the nuances of the perfect plié. I was born a dancer and a teacher. My growth, through ballet and cross-cultural collaborations, has led to a deep interest in the ways dance affects young children's development and well-being. With this commitment to improving the health and well-being of youth internationally—in the spring of my freshman year at Cornell University I founded *Ballet and Books™*, a now trademarked community-based program working to build the confidence and community of young vulnerable children through dance and literacy engagement. With the support of local community-based organizations and national non-profits, I have expanded the program to reach a national audience.

Our vision is to generate a movement bridging dance and literacy to improve young children's lives while increasing diversity in the dance world. My courses and experiential learning opportunities globally have shown me that every culture has some form of dance. I myself, an avid ballerina, have found my own health supported through dance and the mentorship, community connection, and cultural understanding that the art form promotes.

I began ballet at age three in the studio of a classically trained Russian teacher. Tatyana was an exacting instructor, and I feared her criticism, but for the next 16 years I danced with her, and alongside technique and grit, I began to understand how her teaching was influenced by her own experience with Russian training. Her decades at the barre, in an environment of hierarchical authority, shaped and guided her, made her who she was.

In high school, I founded a ballet program for students in Cincinnati's underserved neighborhoods. While I appreciated the values. I learned from classical ballet, my students lacked confidence, support, and had learning difficulties. I had to change my methods, and our goals, to reach them. It was a balancing act; they needed to be aware of my vulnerability, and to see that practice could build confidence. We read books about feelings and I taught ballerinas to stand with poise.

Talia Bailes graduated from the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University in May of 2020 with a degree in Global and Public Health Sciences. After graduation she will begin working at the Centers for Disease Control as a Public Health Associate in Phoenix, Arizona.

Together, we moved beyond perfecting splits—we built a community that provided tools to build ourselves.

For a year after high school, before University, I taught in a primary school while living with a family in Tena, Ecuador. I became a part of the community, attending soccer games and religious gatherings, improving my Spanish and helping with chores. I joined *Mushuk Kawsay*, a community dance group, where we performed to celebrate quinceañeras and to remember peers at funerals. Dance brought our community together. My time in Tena kindled my curiosity on how children in an indigenous Amazonian town develop cognitively as dancers and students.

I returned to the USA eager to learn about children’s brains and development. I applied and was accepted to work in the lab of a pediatrician at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital where I studied emergent literacy, conducting screening questionnaires in underserved clinics. I witnessed social determinants of health—literacy, racism, and poverty—influencing children’s health. I witnessed the power of statistics, understanding the truth behind the data point stating that children in low-resource communities hear 30 million fewer words by the time they enter kindergarten compared to their more affluent peers (Turner, 2015). Additionally, children in low-resource communities where I worked had lower physical activity levels associated with poor health outcomes due to a lack of affordable and accessible programming. This experience left me with questions; how could I be an agent of change and how could I combine healthy development of children’s minds with dance?

As an undergraduate student, these questions fueled my creation of *Ballet and Books*TM. Literacy, a health indicator, became a measure used alongside dance to learn about children’s minds.



Mentors and students pose with their Misty Copeland books

Bridging literacy and dance gave me an outlet to witness the power of dance. I learned leadership skills as a social entrepreneur, expanding the program nationally and evaluating it through research, while supporting children during their development.

Program Development

Ballet and Books™ is a community-based organization dedicated to improving the lives of young children (3-9 years) through dance and literacy. I founded this organization in 2017 as a means to engage community partners in changing the health of vulnerable children in Ithaca, New York. We pride ourselves on serving a diverse community of families through our free and inclusive programming and representing diverse backgrounds ourselves. With generous support from a variety of Cornell University grants and awards, the program has been able to flourish.

Ballet and Books™ integrates literacy into traditional dance instruction for children that do not typically have access to such programs. We bring together high school and college students to teach classes and serve as mentors for younger students. Local children's librarians and diversity experts train our mentors to facilitate better mentor-student engagement and ensure that mentors are equipped to work alongside children with various needs. Our mentors are trained on dialogic reading, a research backed strategy to increase young children's engagement with books (Hutton et al., 2018; Morgan & Meier, 2008; Whitehurst et al., 1988). We have children overcoming dyslexia, working with autism, living in the foster system, and learning English as a second language; what unites us all is a love and passion for dance and youth empowerment.

Impact on Community

In Ithaca alone, we have generated community-wide momentum, partnering with many organizations such as: the local Tompkins County Public Library, Family Reading Partnership, Children's Reading Connection, BodyGear, Cornell University, Ithaca College, Ithaca City School District, and Southside Community Center. Nationally, we have partnered with Orange Ribbons for Jaime, The Swan Dreams Project, and From Our Hearts to Your Toes. The community grassroots support that *Ballet and Books*™ so diligently cultivates, has allowed the program to successfully operate in Ithaca, and now nationally. Each fall, young dancers perform at the local library and in the spring, on Bailey Hall's stage, the largest auditorium at Cornell University. Young dancers from across Tompkins County, step on stage, under the big lights, alongside college dance troupes to perform for a crowd of more than 600 students and community members. This communal experience brings together diverse individuals in a small college town—uniting the broader Ithaca community with a celebration of youth through dance.

*Ballet and Books*TM has successfully served over 90 children in Ithaca, New York. Also, in Ithaca, over 65 unique high school and college students have engaged as mentors, dance teachers, and executive team members—many of those returning for several semesters. Developing chapters will exist in Union City, NJ, Delray Beach, FL, and Concord, NH. We are working on a formal IRB exempt evaluation that with quantitative and qualitative research, will explore an association between dance and health through community engagement. This evaluation will allow our team to track the success of the program and find areas for improvement. Our initial findings suggest high success rates of *Ballet and Books*TM on improving confidence and community for young children. Additional data suggest benefits from high school and college student engagement as well as an improved ability to collaborate across difference. Not only do we work to improve the lives of young children, but we also guide the leadership development of high school and college students through our innovative program.



Students perform in annual dance show at Bailey Hall

Working toward expanding *Ballet and Books*TM—we currently have chapters being developed in four states with the goal of creating a national movement toward improving the health and literacy skills of youth while building confidence and community through dance. With the presence of COVID-19, I recognized the power in continuing to cultivate a community around dance and literacy. The summer of 2020 we began a virtual summer camp and provided all children with books, leotards, snacks, and journals to continue *Ballet and Books*TM in an adapted manner. We have maintained a consistent virtual presence bringing together dance groups from around the world to teach short routines and have mentors reading stories from their homes across the USA. We are dedicated to engaging all of our families throughout the pandemic and in times of uncertainty.

Reflection on personal leadership

The connections I have made at Cornell University and the guidance faculty and staff have provided has allowed this program to flourish. My own learnings at Cornell University incited a commitment to bringing together my academics and applying them to this experiential learning opportunity. Through engaged coursework in the Global and Public Health Sciences major that encouraged critical reflection and an understanding of my own positionality, I reflected on how I, as a young woman, could practice empathy, vulnerability, and compassion in my leadership. I learned skills liaising across different sectors and between individuals with vastly different cultures. Through my work with the Cornell University Public Service Center, I found ways to engage community voices, and learned how to use my own voice to advocate for the betterment of the individuals I served.

I am committed to bringing together people with different backgrounds and beliefs through interdisciplinary connections in order to promote the positive development and well-being of children. With my team of diverse student leaders from across the USA, I am dedicated and excited to work towards the creation of a movement that brings together dance and health. *Ballet and Books*™ has allowed me to not only grow personally and professionally, but also to work collaboratively with my peers to build a community of young people, that make a difference in the world through engaged learning.



Me teaching a class session at Southside Community Center

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