

Jackson School of the Arts: Carmen Wilkins Thompson Long Haul Productions // MCACA Creating Connection project

Carmen Wilkins Thompson: I was always around music and people dancing. It was kinda natural. It felt like that was just what we do, is turn the music on and dance.

MUSIC

I'm Carmen Thompson, I work at Jackson School of the Arts in Jackson, Michigan. I am a dance instructor. I teach hip hop and break dancing.

MUSIC

I've been dancing since I was about eight. All my friends were dancing. We would turn the music on, and dance in a circle, and take turns. And it was music that wasn't really appropriate, songs that talk about movin' your butt to dance. [LAUGHS] It's called Donkey Butt. They call it twerking nowadays.

MUSIC

And there's a dance called the Pop. And we would always do the Pop.

MUSIC

And you're like contracting your whole body back and forth when you do it.

MUSIC

My friends back then would always make fun of me and say I couldn't dance. And I wanted to prove that I could dance. So I'm like, well, let me keep trying. And I felt like I fit in when I was dancing with the girls and I wanted to be their friends. So them saying no made it more of a challenge. It motivated me to push harder and try to be a better dancer. So it was just the beginning of the beginning.

MUSIC

I noticed I always smile when I dance, and so I start doing contests with these girls. We would never win. But I learned the technique and how to do a routine. And it let me know that that was something I could do on my own. I didn't need someone's help.

MUSIC

When I got in college, I took a couple classes. It was a community college and I realized I really wanted to do this. After college, I didn't have any other outlet. In Jackson, Michigan, there's not a lot of hip hop dancing. And so I was feeling kind of lost, and the only time that I've felt strong and happy was when I was dancing. I realized that there was a night club scene.

MUSIC

So I started doing that, but that was very depressing to me. I didn't drink or anything like that or smoke. I didn't really want to party. I just wanted to dance. I wanted to do choreography and spins and shapes. So I would be in the dance floor doing things like you see on Broadway. And everyone's around me, grinding on each other.

MUSIC

So I start looking for places to go that wasn't making me feel like I was sinning. And Jackson School of the Arts came on my radar.

MUSIC

There was hip hop classes, no adult classes at first. So my first dance class here was a thirteen and up break dancing with my son. And I was the only adult. I was 27. At first I used to feel weird because I was the mom getting in my kid's dance class. But then I was like, I kind of look like I'm thirteen or fourteen.

MUSIC

One lady that I kind of call my mentor said, "You, you gotta work on confidence." 'Cause I would go home and I would dance my heart out, and I would come here, and I would freeze up and be nervous because

people were looking. She told me, “You got this, naturally. Just be confident.” So once I've done that, I feel even more love for dancing. It's just opened up. It's like freedom, now.

I was thinking that maybe they needed some flavor of me in this place because I know hip hop. Like they have trained dancers. I'm not a trained dancer. I could tell a trained dancer because it's very precise. Like “One and two and three and four!” and, no! It's not how it goes. You didn't go into an institution and learn it. You were outside with your buddies in the street where hip hop came from. I just have to be like, “Left, right, turn, circle, up up up, jump down, move!!” They needed a hip hop teacher like me.

MUSIC WITH STUDENT NOISE

I assisted for two years and then I became an instructor.

STUDENT NOISE

Tonight is Boys Hip Hop, ages seven to eleven. They are a rambunctious crew, I will warn you ahead of time.

STUDENT NOISE

Carmen (to boys in scene): Boys, take a seat right where you're standing. Just take a seat.

We've been working on listening.

STUDENT NOISE

It might take me eight minutes to get them together, but it's okay. We'll have a beautiful dance tonight.

STUDENT NOISE

Carmen (to boys in scene): Alright, here we go you guys. [MUSIC]
Nice push. And circle.

I do teach them counts, but they just feel the rhythm. They know when to hit it. They know when the music is making that shish sound. That's the time when they slide.

Carmen (to boys in scene): Nice! Beautiful! Very good!

I go back to Africa when I talk to my students sometimes, about where certain dances and the attitude comes from. Like your war stance, an attitude of strength. "I'm not afraid. I'm tough." That is helpful to a dancer to dance with that mindset of where that came from.

Carmen (to boys in scene): Left! Right! Turn! Spin! Shimmy! Come up, hold! Closer!

APPLAUSE

Carmen (to boys in scene): Good job, good job, good job.

STUDENT NOISE

I can feel proud of myself to say, "This is my job."

If this place wasn't here, it would definitely change who I feel like I am. Being a dance instructor here lets me know that I am on the right track.

MUSIC