

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY THROUGH DANCE



June 17, 2014
by Janna Pharris

When Chapman alumnus Craig Shields, B.M. instrumental performance/education '12, joined the musician staff at The Wooden Floor, he didn't realize the job would be a life-altering experience.

"My worldview has definitely expanded since I started working at The Wooden Floor," says Craig.

The Wooden Floor, located in Santa Ana, is a nonprofit organization that annually gives 375 under-served local youth the tools to live fuller, healthier lives through a unique approach grounded in dance. The Wooden Floor is not a dance studio, but rather an innovative nonprofit that breaks the cycle of poverty by giving students a positive artistic outlet combined with academic, college preparatory and family services. Because the children that walk through their doors are typically living near or below the poverty line, all of the services are offered free of charge. Without The Wooden Floor, these children would have very little—if any—access to art.

"I'm a more patient person now because I have to consider where our students are coming from, what they might be dealing with at home or at school, or whether they have a place to sleep at night," says Craig. "I see things from a new perspective."

HELPING CHILDREN LEAP TOWARD A BETTER FUTURE

The students that dance at The Wooden Floor are profiled in a short documentary film directed by Chapman graduates Malica Chehrzad, B.F.A television broadcast '11, Haley Quartarone, B.F.A television broadcast '13, and David Thompson, B.F.A film production '13, as part of a course at

Dodge College of Film & Media Arts. In the film, a young student named Fernando is featured dancing eloquently on one of the wooden floors. Each flawless pose and every seamless jump is a non-verbal expression of the progress he has made against the odds. Coming from a poor family, Fernando's mother began to struggle after his abusive father left. Noticing distress, it was recommended by Fernando's teacher that he take advantage of the free services offered at The Wooden Floor—and that's when his outlook on life started to change.

"We came in with a frown on our faces and ended up leaving with a huge smile. I think that's one of the reasons why most of us call [The Wooden Floor] our 'second home'," says Fernando.

Fernando credits The Wooden Floor staff for helping him achieve so much more than he ever thought possible. Today, he is proudly the first in his family to go to college.

His success, despite growing up in tough situation, is truly inspiring—and he is just one of many disadvantaged students who are now thriving because of The Wooden Floor.

"This is the tenth consecutive year that 100 percent of The Wooden Floor's graduating seniors are going to college" says Craig. "Considering that all of the students come from low-income, under-served backgrounds, this alone is proof that the program is doing amazing work in their lives."



Craig's favorite part of the job is watching the students make progress and grow confident in themselves as dancers. He also enjoys the opportunity to play music. As a member of the musician staff at The Wooden Floor, Craig's position requires advanced musical skills in hand drums, piano and other miscellaneous instruments. Because of this, Craig says he reflects often about his percussion studies at Chapman. "If it weren't for the training I received at

Chapman under Dr. Nicholas Terry and Dr. Justin DeHart, I couldn't do what I'm doing now."

TEACHING LIFE SKILLS THROUGH DANCE

Bringing "Chapman style" mentoring to underprivileged communities



In recent years, several Chapman alumni have joined the team at The Wooden Floor and are impacting lives on a daily basis simply by doing what they love. In addition to Craig, Chapman graduates Meg Glaser Terán, M.A. education '09, Nathan Lammers, B.A. public relations and advertising '08, Derek Bruner, B.A. music composition '08 (M.P.A '12), Jenn Bassage Bonfil, B.F.A. theatre and dance '02, and current Ph.D. candidate Michael Fernández, all proudly represent the Chapman Family throughout the various positions they hold at The Wooden Floor.

Jenn says that her Chapman education helps her to teach the kids lifelong values through dance. "At Chapman I truly felt that all of my professors were 100 percent invested in my



success, both as a dancer and a global citizen," mentions Jenn. "I strive to model that same respect to my students at The Wooden Floor, knowing I can help them to not only point their feet and stretch their legs more, but I can instill values they will use to succeed in life such as discipline, commitment, creativity, self-esteem and teamwork."

The Wooden Floor's Executive Director and Co-CEO, Dawn S. Reese, is pleased that her staff emanates the values of respect, excellence, community and stewardship. "...the Chapman alumni working at our organization have a deep love for the youth we serve and an intrinsic desire to care for the under-served, which reflects the inquiring minds and ethical global citizens Chapman's mission seeks to create," says Reese.

It is clear that Chapman students and alumni are making a huge impact on the lives of children at The Wooden Floor. And the feeling is mutual. Craig says that the kids have changed him for the better. "This is the most fulfilling career experience I've ever had."