

## The Importance of Dance in My Life

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For most of my life dance has been my outlet. It is my place of comfort, my solace, my home. Movement has gotten me through moments in my life when I thought I was not strong enough to continue. Until recently, class has been a place to improve myself, a very personal experience that belonged only to me. The opportunity to teach dance has completely changed my mindset.

Last summer, I had the privilege of volunteering at a low-income housing center teaching dance to kids. The first class was truly one of the most empowering days of my life. We planned movement games and taught a piece of choreography. At first our new students were timid, but they wanted to keep dancing. Seeing how happy it made them was unreal.

I knew I needed to take this experience further. I contacted the center supervisor to ask if I could teach classes on a regular basis during the school year. I have now been teaching on my own at Jackson Park for 11 weeks. I feel so lucky to see these amazing kids, understand them, move with them, and watch them express themselves. I know from what they share in our "hello circle" at the start of every class that they deal with a lot. They deal with challenging family situations, trouble at school, and worry about whether or not there will be dinner when they get home. To create a safe space of release for them means more to me than I can articulate.

Every class, we practice more technical ballet skills like pliés and tendus. One of my eight-year-old students has been begging for more. Recently she ran up to me after class. "What comes after tendus?" she asked. "Dégagés." I replied. I showed her it was just like a tendu, but your foot comes off the floor. Her face lit up with excitement knowing she was learning ballet. If I didn't come to Jackson Park, I don't know that she would have found dance. I hope that by giving her access to this art that I love, I have made a small impact in her life. In each of their lives.

At first glance, their life experiences look so different from mine. I have grown up privileged, something my family has always tried to make me aware of. Going into my work with these kids, I assumed that our disparate backgrounds would translate to disparate viewpoints. My time with them, and my own experiences over the past year, have changed my perspective dramatically.

About a year ago, something started to feel different. I was continuously tired, I felt weak, and my body was sore. I was rehearsing for the school musical on top of my regular dance schedule, and I figured that was to blame. But the pain just kept growing. Eventually my joints were involved, and I could not even walk normally. My hands were so stiff that I could not grip a pencil. I collapsed in ballet class. I had no strength. For the first time in my life, I worried that I may not be able to dance, the one thing my heart truly needs. Staring up at the ceiling from my hospital bed, I was engulfed in helplessness. I needed to move. What surprised me in that moment was that the possibility of not being able to teach felt just as heartbreaking.

A week later I was diagnosed with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (lupus). I have started treatment, and I am beginning to feel strong and like myself again. I know now that I can continue to pursue dance. Getting back to class, and to teaching, has been a monumental relief. I realize that I depend on teaching. I depend on my students' strength, laughter, and the joy

they find in this art form. Being incapable of moving made it impossible to find that within myself. I was frustrated, blocked, stuck. My biggest comfort was to teach, to share my passion with these incredible, resilient kids. Not only did my students help me and give me the hope I needed, but I know I also gave them power to use dance as a means to find strength.

A teacher once told me that everyone has their own mountain to climb. Life is about acknowledging the hard things and accepting that those moments are what shape you. I have come to realize that no matter how different two lives may appear, regardless of our individual hardships, ultimately what we all need is comfort, support and inspiration. My mountain is lupus, and I know that this experience will forever shape how I teach, and that teaching will forever shape how I see the world.

I know that without All That Dance, I would not be where I am now. When I first started menteeing three years ago, the feeling of déjà vu swept over me. I was once one of those kids. One who would never stop talking, always went to get water when we weren't supposed to and had the biggest smile on her face. Taking class then, and taking class now, there is such a huge shift. But the feeling of pure joy, and comfort from my first class, will never leave me. All That Dance is home. This community has given me nothing but support, strength, and love, and I will be forever grateful for that. I am a dancer, I am me, because of ATD. I hope that with this incredible influence, I will be able to provide these amazing kids at Jackson Park with the same inspiration as I have taken from ATD.