

BAX's YOUTHWORKS was featured in the May 2011 issue of **LIFETIME LEARNERS**, an annual supplement magazine mailed with **Dance Magazine** and **Dance Teacher Magazine**.

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Youthworks Celebrates 20 Years



In Brooklyn, professionals volunteer to coach young artists.

Lissa Sangree Calabrese, 11, knew exactly what she wanted to choreograph: a solo modern dance piece about emotions set to the song “Forget You” by the “Glee” cast. She started experimenting with movement at home but found she wasn’t expressing herself as well as she wanted to. Fortunately for Lissa, a community arts center located in her Park Slope neighborhood in Brooklyn offers an annual free program that helped her further explore and develop her dance with coaching from working artists.

Youthworks is just one of the services for artists—both young people and adults—that have been provided for 20 years by the Brooklyn Arts Exchange. Lissa and the 28 other young artists (ages 7-18) who enrolled in Youthworks this year performed their own unique works in dance, theatre, music, film and performance art during a production at BAX in January. They were given rehearsal space for eight weekends this past winter,

coaching by professionals, and a show complete with lights, sound, a stage manager and a press release announcing the event.

Throughout the project, Lissa and her young artist colleagues spent time with volunteer professional artists who lent their expertise, artistry and approach to seeing work. The coaches acted as facilitators, helping the young people clarify their work and guiding them through the creation and revision processes.

Coaching sessions ran two to three hours and the professional artists moved between soloists or groups in a round-robin style, giving the young artists the option of working with an adult when they were ready for feedback. “They give you the freedom to do anything you want to,” says Lissa. “And you get the full experience of a professional performance, while getting help from professional artists. The coaches are really inspiring because they helped me look at little parts of my dance. It’s my choice whether I do something or not.”

“It means learning to ask the right questions,” says Carolyn Hall, a modern dancer who volunteers with Youthworks.



Professional dancers give feedback as young artists develop their own works.

The coaches help guide the creative process. They're not teaching in a traditional sense or imposing personal aesthetics on the work, says Donna Costello, Youthworks coordinator and director of BAX's Dance Performance Workshop. "Supporting a young person's imagination is incredible. Anyone can have an idea but to have it realized is an incredible, important thing to learn," she says. "With Youthworks, adults are supporting that. In that beautiful naïve way, the young artists realize that they can do anything they want."

Carolyn Hall, a modern/contemporary freelance dancer in New York City, has served as a Youthworks coach. "We suggest directions or ways of thinking about their work so the students can develop themselves. However, the end product is absolutely their design," she says. "It means learning how to ask the right questions to clarify what they want to do."

More than 30 professional artist/coaches from a variety of genres volunteered this year. Since the young artists create works in various performance disciplines, the coaches often give input on pieces outside their personal genre—for example, a dancer coach might be asked to look at a dramatic work. "But that allows us to address what the performance is on a theatre scale – what the arc of the piece

is and the content, and it makes us expand our own definition of that," Hall says. "It means having an open mind and listening to their creative ideas and watching what they are doing—not judging but just seeing."

One of Lissa's coaches, for example, suggested that she could experiment with using sharper movements to show anger, which she ended up utilizing in her piece, "Forgetting and Forgiving."

And just as the coaches pass along their expertise and ways of looking at art, they also end up learning from observing the creative process of children. "Something about this program is so in tune to the process I go through as an artist," says Costello. "It feeds me, inspires me and it amazes me. It's all about giving a voice and ownership to a young person." —*Hannah Maria Hayes*

