



DANCING GODDESSES

By Edie Weinstein-Moser

WHAT IS THE PROFILE OF A MODERN-DAY GODDESS? It looks like an inner city young woman whose face was lacerated with glass held in the hand of another teen who thought she was too pretty and in the wrong place at the wrong time. It could appear to be a courageous girl who left an abusive relationship. It may even be a group of junior and senior high school students who witness that women are not valued and as a result, don't honor themselves. And it definitely takes the form of a dedicated movement therapist named Emily Nussdorfer who is the founder of "The Girls on the Move Visionary Arts Leadership Program."

Under the umbrella of Moving Creations Inc., this program serves at-risk girls, ages 12-16, living in Philadelphia. Emily describes the demographic as: "Predominantly African American girls, who live in socio-economically vulnerable communities marked by resource deprivation, violence and crime. Many of these girls are in single parent households, often don't go to school, or don't have

the motivation to do well in school, and often get into fights. The program fills the need to become part of a united community in which they can be friends with other girls. They get together and make things happen, supporting one another." Many of these girls have little trust for other females, seeing them as competition for boys and attention. By the time they reach pre-adolescence, they have already internalized the culture's negative stereotypes about women. One of the program's goals is to teach them that girls can empower each other together and help each other have the motivation to transform their lives and encourage each other to become community leaders. The first time they meet, they are total strangers. By the end of a 12-week module they have become a family. They experience "identity repair amidst their culture, community and within themselves through artistic exploration, expression and creation in an empowering and creative female community."

One of the factors that makes this

program so successful with the girls it serves is that, according to Emily: "We meet them where they're at." Powerful, successful female artists who are predominately from a similar background and culture to the girls' are mentors and guides in the program. Diversity is celebrated, as many of the teachers are multi-cultural. Emily offered that "The number one goal is to form a mentoring relationship with each girl that will endure beyond the length of the program, finding a way to reach that girl." She carefully trains each artist; they have clinical supervision daily, and need to complete a D.A.P. (Data Assessment Plan) for each participant and group they run.

At this point, Emily and her troupe of female artist-mentors have successfully completed two of the three phases of the program. Fund-raising is a crucial factor in allowing for entry into stage three. Phase one is entitled Introduction to Performance Creation. It involves empowering the girls by means of artistic self-expression; using genres of dance which includes step and hip-hop, honoring their culture, conflict resolution, theater improvisation, writing

poetry and designing costumes. It allows them, Emily shared, “to safely channel libidinal and aggressive energy,” in ways that heal and construct rather than harm and destruct. It provides safe space for them to “speak the truth of their own identities and worlds to themselves and others through the creative arts.” Using rhythm is vital to the work since she observes: “When people share rhythms together, there is a non-verbal synchrony that transcends language and belief systems. Dance celebrates the power of unity through shared movement.”

The second phase is called Visionary Mask Creation and literally allows the girls to “envision the life they want to create for themselves and their communities using a combination of dance, theater, creative visualization and mask art.” Emily brought in a group of mentors to embody various archetypal figures, representing Goddesses of the Haitian, African, Egyptian, Native American, Hindu, Celtic, Mexican, Greek, Germanic and Israeli cultures. Each woman had an assignment to create a visual template that involved symbolism related to a Goddess, that incorporated elements of Jungian theory, the Shamanic journey, and fairy tales. In this way, they enabled the girls to take an archeological journey into the past, unearthing treasures that expressed how various cultures valued the Divine Feminine. It provided them with powerful and positive role models from which to re-build their own fragile sense of self.

At the end of the second phase, there were seven girls who remained committed to the program and each chose an archetype to embody: The Peace Maker; this was the girl whose character ended the abusive relationship by standing up against it. The Healer; this was the young woman whose character had been assaulted by girl



gangs, and danced away her pain. The Leader explored what it is to be a leader to herself. Duality represented love and hate, water and fire – all the essence of who she is. Conscience communicated having been stepped on and destroyed and then passionately committed to the process of re-building herself. The Mother was the soul of communicating for violence to end in her community. Opticon Naturale was the Mother Goddess who was about parenting, celebrating the seasons of the Earth and connecting to the creator within to heal abandonment, loss and pain. The girls performed their characters’ dance stories in mask with black light and received a standing ovation from an audience of over 100 people.

Stage three is called MAP (Multi-Arts Performance) for Change and involves investigative research and original movie-making integrated with a live black-light group dance celebrating the power of the visions of the super-girl characters. This stage will focus on group performance creation utilizing the visions and stories of each super-girl character as catalysts for positive community and system change in Philadelphia. Each girl will be armed with a camera and her character’s vision for change and will interview members of her community to gain support in her community for her vision of change. The girls will

come together to integrate their video data into a collective film testifying to their passion to make positive changes in the quality of life for themselves and their communities. The girls will perform live black-light mask street-theater dances in their communities throughout Philadelphia to draw attention to their vision and mission and heighten the movie making process. The finale of the program will be a Multi-Arts Performance (MAP) incorporating the screening of the girl’s original

movie with a live performance of the super girls’ black-light mask theater dances of power and transformation. Through offering this MAP of the girls’ collective visions of a better life for themselves, their communities and for Philadelphia as a whole, the girls hope to inspire and create momentum for positive community change on every level in Philadelphia. This MAP for Change will be offered to a gathering of civic and community leaders with time for Q & A.

I watched a DVD of the performance that occurred at the end of the second phase and found myself in tear-filled awe of what this group had manifested. This was not merely a collection of potentially damaged girls; it was a clan of polished, confident young women who had blossomed exquisitely into talented artists. They were each interviewed and one of the most poignant statements that speaks volumes of its success came as an expression of gratitude that, if not for the program, “I would have been a statistic.” How is it possible to adequately place a value on that sentiment?

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