

Classroom Heroes: D.C. Performer Paige Hernandez Reaches Students Through Performing Arts

Posted: 03/22/11 10:05 PM

Paige Hernandez has found a profession for herself mixing two crafts, teaching and performing arts. She is a teaching artist, an actress and dancer who uses her performing arts skills in the classroom.

Hernandez has built a reputation for herself in the Washington D.C. area as a local stage performer, a career that she launched alongside teaching. "After I graduated," she said, "I almost immediately jumped into the teaching artist profession."

Hernandez works with students of all ages, from preschool to college level and even adults, leading professional development workshops for fellow teachers.

But she does not hold a regular position in any school. Instead, Hernandez works with programs who send teaching artists to different schools to complete in-school residencies -- regular biweekly visits to a class for seven weeks to a full school year.

Splitting her time between different classes and schools means she has the flexibility to maintain her acting career. HuffPost spoke to her during her lunch break on a day packed with two high school dance workshops, an audition and a starring role in an evening show.

"I feel a little spread thin," she said. But she enjoys having the best of both worlds in her dual profession. "I love it! I wouldn't change it for the world."

It also means she comes in contact with a huge number of students and classrooms. "Between two organizations I've served over 100 classrooms and probably a few thousand students," she said.

Hernandez works with [Arena Stage](#) a performing arts center that hosts a variety of youth education programs. She also works with [Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through The Arts](#), which focuses on teaching 3- to 5-year-olds their normal curriculum through song, dance and puppetry.

She especially enjoys working with young children because they learn so quickly. "To see the sparks go off in them is so cool," she said.

Though she's well-versed in theater as an actress, dancer and even director, everything comes back to hip-hop for Hernandez, who describes herself as a "self-proclaimed B-girl" (break dance girl) who runs her own hip-hop classes. "Teachers and students -- especially inner-city kids -- can really relate to it," she said.

"She's got that swagger," said Charles Franklin IV, a junior at Duke Ellington School for the Arts, who has studied dance and theatre for seven years with Hernandez through different Arena Stage programs. "Everything about her is hip-hop. It's hip-hop fever."

"She inspired me to dance," Franklin said. When she dances, "it's all there ... so full of smooth, intellectual movement."

Working with Hernandez has encouraged him to pursue the arts. "Paige has been there the whole time," said Franklin, who plans to attend a performing arts college after high school. "She has been a good, strong backbone for my theater life."

Franklin described Hernandez as having "an amazing vibe," full of enthusiasm. "But she can buckle down, get serious, get things done," he said, talking about rehearsal for a show they're working on together, *Too Fast, Too Curious*.

Her balanced disposition proves successful in teaching (or performing) a lesson plan to an effervescent or unpredictable classroom of students.

Mimi Flaherty Willis, Senior Director of Education at Wolf Trap, described how Hernandez improvised a lesson plan adapted from a book in which a poorly built tower falls over. Each pre-kindergarten student named a shaped building block and added it to the tower. But the students were so careful that the tower never fell.

"Another teacher might have knocked the tower down [to conform to the story]", she said. "Paige had enough confidence in her ability to improvise in drama to continue," Willis remembered.

Wolf Trap residencies use performing arts to teach 3- to 5-year-olds their usual lessons in collaboration with their regular teachers. They receive federal grants to research and disseminate new methods for teaching with the arts. This year STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) is the focus of the many of their residences.

Through the program, Hernandez is co-teaching math at Brightwood Education Campus alongside preschool teacher Kalpana Kumar Sharma.

Teaching math through song and dance is an ingenious idea, according to Sharma.

She explained some young students have trouble counting. They skip numbers or break the sequence from one to 10. But when the sequence is applied to a dance, every number counts and it's obvious if it's left out.

"Teaching with movement, students don't skip numbers," Sharma said. "It's so much easier for them to see it. They remember the whole sequence."

Hernandez's "Math Dance" that she uses to teach young students to count is her recent claim to fame. Students teach it to their peers, show their parents. "It's really caught on," said Hernandez, proud.

Teaching with song and dance is especially helpful when working with children who suffer from learning disabilities, as one Huff Post blogger explained in a [recent post](#). At a young age, many of these children have not yet been transferred to special education programs.

"Arts are the best way for them to express themselves, Hernandez explained. "I can sing a song and do a dance and all they have to do is clap their hands and tap their feet. They feel so accomplished. It empowers them."

Her co-teacher Sharma says the residencies with Wolf Trap have raised the importance of math in their school, which tends to push literacy. She noted how Hernandez uses storybooks and narratives for math instruction. "This year I can see how math and literacy are balanced," she said. Hernandez's residency has been so successful that "the class is several months ahead," explained Sharma.

This May, Brightwood will host its first celebratory "Math Week" for students and parents, in lieu of "Reading Week" from previous years.

Above all, Hernandez aspires to be a strong influence to her students -- one she wishes she had as a child. She grew up a multiracial girl in predominately Black inner city Baltimore, lacking role models that shared her mixed background. "We didn't have the Obamas or Tiger Woods," she explained.

"More than anything I aim to be what I wanted to see as a young girl: a strong, passionate, smart woman of color."

Now Hernandez sees little girls in her classroom whose complexions resemble her own. She sees them look up to her, wide-eyed and impressionable.

"It means so much to me now that I can be that woman," she said.

Find out more about Hernandez the performer and teacher on her [website](#) or visit the website of her current show [Paige in Full](#).