

DANCE WITH A STAR

JIMMY LOCUST, CHOREOGRAPHY CHANGING LIVES IN FAIRFIELD COUNTY

written by FERN PESSIN

Sitting in the sold out audience at Curtain Call Theater's (Stamford, CT) production of *A Chorus Line*, I'm struck by the similarity between the life and passion of Jimmy Locust, the production's choreographer, to the lyrics of the song being performed on stage. Discovering what makes your heart beat faster, earning recognition (and a living) doing something you love, is the ultimate dream. Jimmy Locust is living his dream.

A bustling, bubbling, burst of energy, Jimmy shakes my hand, drops his huge bag on the floor with a thunk and is ready to talk about what makes him passionate. I wanted to know how and why Jimmy settled in to Fairfield County after growing up in Dayton, Ohio and climbing the ladder in the dance world to receive recognition and accolades from the stars... Why not NYC? Why not Los Angeles?

Spending several years living in Prospect Heights in Brooklyn, NY, close to the train to NYC, he explains "I started to miss seeing more nature; I wanted to live in a community that didn't have a "cement" feeling to it." When he had the opportunity to substitute for a dance instructor friend in Stamford, he fell in love with the grass, environment and positive reception he received. "Fairfield County is approachable and yet upscale; exclusive and yet welcoming; not as "in your face" as Brooklyn and Manhattan can be."

Happy here, Jimmy feels welcomed and at home being surrounded by all the industry people who live in this community. Jimmy has been teaching dance to children of the stars he works with in Hollywood and New York. He finds that the children of famous people here in Fairfield County, like the other students in the area, are well adjusted, highly educated, and well spoken without all the pretensions of celebrity and affluence. Jimmy's teaching style is to motivate by using positive reinforcement, providing boundaries and limits, within "order" (following the rules) – JL wants them to take something away that will help them in their livelihood. He only hires teachers who embrace this style. Parents know that he is committed to care for the whole child by providing great training and positive reinforcement that leads to character building.

As a child, Jimmy stopped growing at 4'9" tall. Bullied and taunted for most of his life, he found solace in dance. When he was drawn to pursue dancing as a career, he was continually told that he was too short to ever be a success. "Criticism like that can either hold you down or motivate you..." Jimmy says passionately, "it motivated me!" At an audition when he was 18, Gus Giordano, the man who changed the face of jazz dance, told Jimmy "I don't see your size; I see your dance." Jimmy looked at me intensely and said "When someone instills in you that you are valid as an artist – that can motivate you!" He went on to dance with and choreograph for music icons Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, Quincy Jones, Debbie Allen, Justin Bieber... and more! "That I can do!"

"Giving something to my community makes me feel at home" he says passionately, and that thought motivated him to create Harmony Nation in 2005. Harmony Nation, an anti bullying and anti-hate program, taught through dance performances presented

at local school assemblies, was started as a way for Jimmy to motivate students to stick with their dreams even if they are being pushed down by others. The show is educational, written by Jimmy, updated, personalized and performed by students at the Locust Performing Arts Center. Jimmy had a dream he made happen - to dance with great stars – and, despite many obstacles and negative responses along the way, he succeeded in achieving his goal. Now nationally recognized and in high demand nationwide, his belief that anyone can achieve what they envision comes through when he talks with students.

Harmony Nation has a few critical messages that are important in this day of cyber bullying added to physical attacks resulting in high suicide rates among teenagers. Empathetically, Jimmy believes that often young people do not understand that emotional and verbal bullying has just as much negative impact as physical bullying. After years of being the victim, Jimmy realized that the cause of most bullying is related to negative self-esteem of the bully and Jimmy tries to convey to the victims that it's not their fault – that the person who is on the attack is not feeling good about him/herself. Jimmy explains that he now has compassion for the bullies because they don't know who they really are.

When a person feels that they are being attacked, the message Harmony Nation conveys is "Don't be silent – tell a counselor, parent, friend, someone you trust – Bullies scare you into not saying anything..."

After talking about his own experiences and sharing what motivated him to become the success he is, the presentation is followed by scenes – cyber bullying; physical bullying; verbal bullying – so the audience can identify the differences and can put themselves into the situation. At end of each live performance the audience is invited to dance with JL on stage where, in the end, the audience comes around to support their classmates and the students learn that they are accountable for their own behavior. "We all make mistakes - the important thing is what we do with our mistakes; *That* makes us the people or person that we are."

In addition to his work with Harmony Nation, Jimmy spends 17 hours or more a week with his students in the classroom, managing the Locust Performing Arts Center that teaches dance to over 300 students from 3 years old through adult, and traveling the country choreographing, dancing and appearing in videos and television.

"My talent comes through God" Jimmy shares. Through his church, the Greater Bridgeport Christian Fellowship, JL has gone



Photo: Jody Frank

**I got to class
And had it made,
And so I stayed
The rest of my life...**

**I can do this.
That I can do!
I can do that.**



to Kenya and Cairo to teach dance as a form of communication to bring peace. He leads a dance company at the church that “keeps art alive in the church, a dance ministry.” Giving back is how he uses his gift.

Currently Jimmy is part of a movement to “let art come out of us”. Working with recording artist/guitarist Drew Yowell and painter, JoAnn Thompson Clayborn they created a multi-art presentation called Simplicity. The sold out performance at the Long Ridge School featured Drew playing music, Jimmy dancing and, at the end, JoAnn revealed the painting that she worked on during the performance. “Teaching through all medium- blending music, video, painting, etc. will give students some “oomph” about them when they go off to college.” Jimmy wants to give students confidence by having them experience of variety of arts, “handing the torch to the next generation”. At the Locust Performing Arts Center, students are getting bookings and becoming professional dancers (as are their instructors), becoming the next stars.

Seemingly indefatigable Jimmy leans across the table, drawing me in closer, to share his latest project... in the works is a 45 minute film with an accompanying booklet to bring into school curriculum. Students will write in their booklet about what they learn on diversity and bullying. The goal is to offer a packet for any school that may want it. He was the keynote speaker at the Choate School for the independent schools diversity conference. And he is meeting with the Mead School staff to teach them how to identify bullying behaviors in their students.

Recently Jimmy attended a Stamford Symphony event and was so moved that he wrote the Symphony office and wanted to know more about them. Hearing how talented the musicians are (most of the musicians work in Manhattan in the major orchestras and on Broadway) “made me once again happy to be in this community where thriving arts are as good as NYC” opined Jimmy during our chat over an iced coffee at Starbucks. “Not only am I excited, I am thoroughly honored that there is a place where I can use the expertise that I’ve worked at my whole life to apply it to this fundraiser.” Jimmy agreed to choreograph a special themed performance during the Stamford Symphony opening night gala and benefit concert on October 15. Ragtime Rendezvous at the Symphony Speakeasy brings visions of dancing girls in fringe and feathers to mind. Dancers from A Chorus Line and other theater performances have agreed to donate their performance to add to the ambiance of this fundraising event that supports classical music for Fairfield County audiences and music education programs.

A Chorus Line was the final show of the Curtain Call Theater’s twentieth anniversary season. Jimmy loves Curtain Call and what they do for the community. He was introduced to Connecticut

audiences a few years ago when he choreographed Les Cages Aux Folles. Working with director Lynne Colatrella on Sweet Charity, Les Cage and now Chorus Line, has been one of his favorite things. His selection as choreographer for A Chorus Line coincided with the opening of his new school and Jimmy feels that it was “new beginnings all around.”

The twenty-four dancers in the show became a big family. With a private Facebook page, they communicated and supported each other, shared videos, left notes for each other and worked together to create a powerful presence on stage. This passion and commitment is what draws Jimmy back to do show after show he explains.

Lou Ursone, Curtain Call Theater Executive Director, and Lynne Colatrella, founder of Curtain Call Theater and VP, Events and Marketing at Stamford Downtown Special Services District (DSSD), “have always been helpful with anything I’ve done, supportive, encouraging and directing people to my school and programs.” Jimmy served as a judge in this year’s “Dancing with the Stars” fundraiser for the theater and watched proudly as his new dancers premiered the Chorus Line finale at the benefit show which raised money for the theater.

His cell phone rings - a fire alarm has gone off at the school, which is currently using space at the Stamford Plaza Hotel on Summer Street as JL is building out a new studio and school. Jimmy, grabbed his huge bag, apologized and raced off to make sure his students and teachers were taken care of and the classes would go on. Jimmy believes the success of his school may be based on the fact that parents know that he is committed to caring for the whole child – to provide great dance training through positive reinforcement and character building. “Jimmy’s work in the community is based in his desire to nurture the whole person through the arts. Jimmy lives his life like the song “I can do that; that I can do”.” □

**SEE JIMMY’S CHOREOGRAPHY WORK LIVE AT THE
STAMFORD SYMPHONY GALA AND CONCERT**

Saturday, October 15th

For further details please visit stamfordsymphony.org

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