



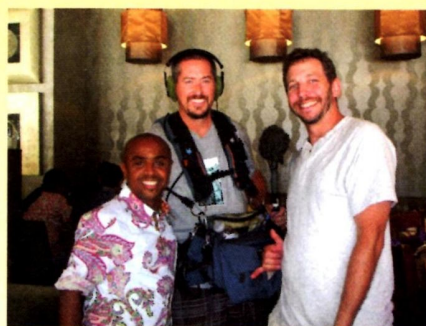
# Dancing BIG

Jimmy Locust's kid-oriented mission matches his high-energy career

By Ryan P. Casey

A normal week might find Jimmy Locust teaching 20 classes at his studio in Stamford, Connecticut. Or he might be on a plane to Los Angeles or Hawaii to choreograph a music video. Or a camera crew might be following him as he prepares for an upcoming performance with his acclaimed youth performance team, Hip Hop's Finest. Life keeps the diminutive Locust, who is four feet nine inches tall, on the move.

A veteran teacher and performer, Locust is also a studio owner, celebrity choreographer, and budding reality-TV star. Outside of his professional work, he uses his talents to help others by running several community and anti-bullying programs for children and teens.



Locust, 51, owns and directs Locust Performing Arts Center, founded in Stamford in 2010. After operating for several years out of a hotel ballroom, the studio moved to its own building in September 2012, where it serves more than 400 students of all ages each week, in disciplines ranging from tap and hip-hop to modern dance and musical theater,

including several pre-professional youth performance companies.

## A dual career

When Locust, a native of Dayton, Ohio, moved to Connecticut in 2005, he had what few other dance studio owners can boast of: a Hollywood resume that includes appearances with music icons such as Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, Paula Abdul, and Quincy Jones. Locust continues to split his time between Stamford

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TOP: Jimmy Locust brings L.A.-style energy to a class in Giordano jazz technique.

ABOVE LEFT: Locust shares his experiences being bullied for his height on the reality show *Locust Under 5'*.



and Los Angeles, running his studio classes and companies and community-education programs while working as an in-demand choreographer.

"It's really a blessing to have a career where I can wear different hats," he says. "It keeps me on my toes. I can bring the energy from L.A. back to my students, and I can bring the energy from my classroom to the directors and producers I'm working with."

But he doesn't keep these two worlds separate—in fact, he brings his Hollywood career into the classroom every chance he gets.

"If I'm teaching a certain move or lesson that relates to one of my experiences, I take a moment to share it," Locust says. "My students love to hear those stories and learn what it was like to work with a celebrity. They instantly want to be better. It gets them to work hard."

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Locust's professional experience, "he understands how to push his students to work at that level. He'll say, 'What if you had an audition in New York tomorrow? Would you dance like that?'"

To emphasize the importance of self-discipline, for example, Locust tells his students about dancing with Michael Jackson at the 1995 Video Music Awards. When Jackson was in the studio for rehearsals, Locust and his fellow dancers were told to not even look at him, but to be on top of their game and focus on what they were practicing. Self-control and discipline enabled Locust to ignore the legendary performer's imposing presence.

"They can apply these lessons right away, every time they're in class with me," says Locust. "They understand that I'm coming from a professional standpoint and preparing them for the industry."

And he has plenty of professional experience to draw in the classroom. In 2011, he collaborated with the Stamford Symphony, choreographing the opening number for its annual fund-raiser, and is currently



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agent and co-founder of McDonald/Selznick Associates

Left: Locust’s mission is to give students the same personal attention and encouragement he received from Gus Giordano and Paula Abdul.

working with Stamford’s regional theater company, *Curtain Call*, on a production of *Legally Blonde*, which opens this summer. At the same time, he has been choreographing for the CW reality show *The Next*, featuring Joe Jonas and Gloria Estefan. Additionally, he is the creative director for recording artist Arika Kane’s upcoming music videos and tour.

### Overcoming odds

When Locust was young, a career in the industry seemed unlikely. Jaundice stunted his growth from birth, and as a child he endured constant ridicule about his short stature. He loved dance, but he felt self-conscious about the way people looked and pointed at him.

But then, for five years, and while still a teenager, Locust danced as a principal member of Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago. The director, jazz master Gus Giordano, gave Locust the confidence boost he needed when he auditioned for the company during a summer workshop.

“He told me, ‘I don’t see your height; I see your dancing. I know you’re small, but I’m looking at how big a dancer you are.’ For once, somebody put my talent first, instead of my size. From that point on, nobody could bring me down. So when I walked in front of people like Paula Abdul to audition, Gus had already instilled in me self-esteem.”

The similarly short-statured Abdul was encouraging, assuring Locust that the right job would eventually come

along—and it did. In 1988 she cast him in the music videos for her hit singles “Knocked Out” and “Forever Your Girl.”

“He was different from everyone else and worked it to his advantage,” says Julie McDonald, Locust’s first agent and co-founder of McDonald/Selznick Associates, a talent agency based in Los Angeles and New York. “He put himself out there in a way that made employers change their projects just so they could cast him. He always approached his work the way he approaches life—with full enthusiasm and 100 percent focus.”

To make up for his small size, Locust emphasized his enthusiasm and personality at every audition, showing up early to secure himself a spot in the front row. Even when he was cut, he had often made a memorable impression on the casting crew.

Locust’s work with Abdul gained him access to the industry he had worked so hard to break into. He went on to choreograph for sports and fashion companies (including Reebok and Speedo), act and dance in films such as *Coming to America* and *Teen Witch*, and work with recording artists such as Monica and Raven Simone.

### Bringing dance to the community

After many years of traveling the world and living in various parts of the country, Locust decided that it was time to give back by creating a performing-arts school. Shortly

after moving to Connecticut, he co-founded Stamford Performing Arts Center with friends Carol and Gerrit Paasman, bringing in top New York dance talent to teach more than 400 students each week. After several years in business together, their artistic visions changed, and in 2009 Locust departed to work on opening his own studio.

He also began developing after-school dance programs for underprivileged and low-income students in Stamford, hiring teachers from his studio as instructors. With the aid of the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st Century Community Learning Centers, he launched 10-week programs at Stamford Family YMCA and Chester Addison Community Center.

Locust wanted to incorporate his programs into academic settings (primarily schools and community education centers) because “in order to be a great dancer,” he says, “you need to be an educated dancer—not just in history, but in all the subjects you learn in school.” He meets with the directors of interested organizations and determines what kind of programming they are seeking, whether for a short period like six weeks or a full academic year. He then crafts a curriculum that will fit that time frame and incorporate appropriate skill sets and movement techniques.

Through various styles of dance, Locust’s programs attempt to build self-esteem and establish healthy boundaries for students, many of



whom come from family situations that don't offer the attention or guidance they need. The students learn how to carry themselves, collaborate with their peers, and have respect for their instructors, each other, and what they are learning. Locust and his faculty cultivate a positive atmosphere by teaching the students how to work together despite personal struggles and differences, and they aim to increase the students' confidence by finding something in each of them to compliment every week.

"The students get support and encouragement from their whole class, not just their teacher," Richardson says. "When Jimmy gives a compliment, everyone applauds that student along with him. That's how he builds a safe and positive environment."

"These kids don't think they're intelligent, but they are—we're just homing in on it and cultivating it," Locust says. "That's what my goal really is: to change the minds and hearts of these children who feel like they don't have a chance."

From each outreach program, he selects one exceptional student to receive a full year's scholarship to his studio—including tuition, costumes, recital tickets, and photos—so he or she can continue studying dance in the community.

### Anti-bullying effort

Through Harmony Nation (formerly titled No Hate But Harmony), an anti-bullying performance troupe he started in 2005, Locust seeks to combat negative behavior he had witnessed in his community. Taking performances into Connecticut schools, local high school students recruited by Locust perform original skits and dance routines that demonstrate bullying and methods for handling it. Locust speaks to the students about his own experiences being bullied for his height, using his career as an example of success despite adversity.

"My effort is to get my message out there before more kids hurt themselves," Locust says. "We need to

pour positivity into our children; not enough people are doing that."

To share his message and his experiences with a larger audience, Locust developed an online reality show, *Locust Under 5*; which debuted last year with two short episodes on YouTube. A third episode was released in January and Locust is negotiating with a production company to bring the show to TV.

Unlike the drama-fueled dance competitions that populate reality TV, Locust's show has a positive, educational tone; it tested well with focus groups as a program that parents and their children can watch comfortably together.

In the show's initial episodes, Locust describes how he overcame issues related to his height, booked his first commercial jobs, and came to love teaching and choreographing.

He advises one student who is being bullied at school and works with another student who has misophonia, an extreme sensitivity to certain sounds, and for whom dance class is one of the only activities in which she can participate without discomfort.

### His mission as mentor

Despite juggling myriad projects and duties, Locust has never lost sight of his focus: to teach and mentor children and teens with the same kind of personal attention and encouragement that he received from people like Giordano and Abdul.

"With every child I meet, whether in my own studio, at a workshop, or on tour, I find something good in them," Locust says. "And I look them in the eye and tell them that if they stay with their dream, they can achieve it." ✦

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