

Class Act

Dancer Jimmy Locust steps out of the spotlight to teach life lessons to children

BY KATHY SATTERFIELD



Jimmy Locust

On paper Jimmy Locust is impressive: local business owner, professional dancer and choreographer, anti-bullying advocate, and mentor to hundreds of kids in Stamford and surrounding towns. In person he impresses even more with a positive, enthusiastic, focused and down-to-earth attitude that belies his Hollywood resumé. Jimmy, who lived in Los Angeles for many years before moving to Brooklyn and then Connecticut, danced with Michael Jackson at the 1995 MTV

Video Music Awards. He has also performed at the Academy Awards and the Grammys, and in Paula Abdul music videos, among other marquee appearances.

Still, while sitting in a homegrown café in Black Rock, where he lives, it's hard to imagine Jimmy anywhere *but* here. His face lights up when he talks about the children he teaches at the Locust Performing Arts Center, his dance studio in Stamford, where more than 460 students attend weekly for tap, hip-hop, modern dance, ballet, musical

theater and a hearty dose of self-esteem. Jimmy has a vision for LPAC that goes way beyond business. "My branding is positivity and nurturing and love and healthy boundaries," he says, "and taking the time to know all my students' names and their families."

He and his staff find something inspiring to say to every student at least once a week. "You'll see walls break, a guard will come down and their eyes will light up," Jimmy says. "A lot of kids don't get enough [positive feedback]. Locust is a place where we make sure you get it."

Jimmy knows from experience what it's like to crave that kind of encouragement, to feel like an outcast. Unusually short for his age, the result of jaundice that stunted his growth from birth, he was teased relentlessly while growing up in Dayton, Ohio. He describes feeling like he was constantly fighting to catch up to his peers. Later, at four-foot-nine, the aspiring dancer was often overlooked for dancers who better fit the idealized—read statuesque—image of what a performer should look like.

That was not the case with legendary jazz master Gus Giordano, whom Jimmy considers a mentor. "He broke every rule in the book by putting me in his company. He saw that I wanted to be an artist, so he didn't discriminate. I will always love him for that because that experience began this," Jimmy says, referring to his studio and the special programs he runs.

Jimmy also credits his mother; former

UpClose

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colleague LaVelle Smith, who offered him a part without an audition; and entertainment icon Michael Jackson, who once told him that he was a “really good dancer” during a rehearsal for the MTV Video Awards. “That alone was another level of mentorship,” Jimmy says.

The morale-boosting reinforcement Jimmy received, and the effect it had on him, is what inspired him to give back to the community. In addition to his studio, he has worked with the Stamford Family YMCA and Domus to develop dance programs for low-income students. Dance, he explains, motivates and emboldens children who may not be getting the attention or guidance they need. By way of example, he brings up ballet. “You’re holding yourself up. You have to be lifted and ready; that’s going to help [children] in their confidence,” he

says. “When a child walks upright, they are less apt to be bullied because they look confident.”

To achieve a similar end, Jimmy founded Harmony Nation, a performance troupe made up of high school students that visit schools to put on dance routines and original skits that reenact bullying situations and how to deal with them. Harmony Nation has performed at several Stamford schools, including Julia A. Stark Elementary, King School and Davenport Ridge Elementary. “Kids learn better from kids,” he says, to explain the mission of Harmony Nation. “[The message] makes better sense to them.”

During the presentation, Jimmy also addresses the students. “I think my story is a bridge for them. When I say I stuck with my dream and got to be onstage with Paula Abdul and Michael Jackson, it gives them

the opportunity to say ‘So what if I wear glasses or I’m a different size? If I stick with my dream I can do it.’”

It’s worth noting that Jimmy discovered his passion to give back by accident, while living in Brooklyn, after a friend asked him to sub a dance class at a Stamford studio. A year later, he accepted their offer to teach full-time. “When I saw how the children reacted to me, that’s when I knew I had another gift,” he explains, acknowledging that every once and a while, he still travels to Los Angeles for projects that come up. “I miss the essence of L.A. but I don’t miss L.A.,” Jimmy says. “When I think about the seeds that I’m planting here it cancels it out, because our children’s future is much more important than a one-day event [like the Grammys], and I’m at a point where I want to leave a legacy.”