

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Kara Foran

ArtWell Provides a Creative Outlet for Philadelphia Youth

by Darcy Grabenstein

Since graduate school, when painting helped her recover from a serious injury and significant personal losses, Susan Teegen, MDiv, has believed in the transformative power of the arts. This belief prompted her to form [ArtWell](#) in 2000, putting the healing properties of the arts to use in the broader community. A nonprofit organization, "ArtWell supports young people and their communities through multidisciplinary arts expression, education, and creative reflection to celebrate their strengths, thrive while facing complex challenges, and awaken their dreams."

An ordained minister, interfaith counselor, and hospice chaplain as well as a visual artist, Teegen said she has always been interested in the intersection of the arts, healing, spirituality, social justice, and community. "ArtWell is an expression of that."

Teegen created ArtWell to respond to the chronic community violence in Philadelphia by introducing a preventive, educational approach to reach underserved areas and youth facing discrimination, poverty, and the everyday challenges of growing up. ArtWell offers artists long-term residencies mostly in Philadelphia public schools, bringing together a variety of arts disciplines.

ArtWell's programs—the Art of Growing Leaders, HeartBeat, We the Poets, EcoArts, MasterPeace and ArtWell@Work—use a process-oriented, healing-centered, trauma-responsive, strength-based technique. Teegen noted that the HeartBeat program is the most movement oriented, exploring Afro-Caribbean music, drumming, and dance.

Today, ArtWell has several dance instructors on staff, each bringing a unique perspective to the art. For instance, Jan Jeffries, an accomplished tap dancer whose family owned a dance school in West Philly, developed her own style of performance called Rhythm Taps.

Gabi Montoya, a 2018 graduate of Drexel University's dance program, spent the spring and summer of her junior year in a co-op work program with ArtWell. She co-taught a movement and poetry class at Southwark Elementary School in South Philly as part of ArtWell's We the Poets program.

Upon graduation, Montoya expanded her commitment to her community by participating in the [Artist Year](#) program. A one-year stint turned into two as Montoya taught dance first at a middle school and then a high school. Montoya now works at a gymnastics facility, guiding students in movement activities. "I appreciate ArtWell's big step in my journey of teaching artistry."

Instructor Anssumane Sillá has performed as a dancer and drummer with the Voices of Africa Drum Ensemble, was a choreographer for the Ku?lu? Me?le? African Dance Ensemble, and was a recipient of the "Best in Philly" Dance Class award in 2012. Teegen remembers how one of Sillá's students was extremely shy and quiet. He would simply sit and watch during class. On the last day of class, Sillá invited the student to do a "call and response" for drumming, and the student came to life. "It's the small things" that make a difference, she said, adding that drumming is a great outlet for students who don't want to be quiet, allowing them to express themselves.

Akosua Nyo (she used to say "not in your face, just en-yo" when teaching students how to pronounce her name) said Sillá introduced her to ArtWell through Voices of Africa. The all-women drumming and acapella group invited Sillá to accompany it on tour. "I loved what ArtWell was doing in the schools and their approach," she said. "It just ignited something in me."

Prior to joining ArtWell in 2014-15, Nyo started her dance career in ballet, training with Philadanco in the '70s as a teenager, then dancing with the now-defunct Tri-state Ballet. At that time, she said dance was "really kind of small and segregated," adding that as a Black dancer who wanted to do ballet, "it was kind of hard." Looking for African dance opportunities, she found the now-defunct Diaspora Dance Theater. Eventually, Nyo earned a degree in counseling, which she said later helped with her work at ArtWell.

Nyo said that while she was teaching she did not realize the full impact ArtWell made. Now, when she runs into high school students who had been in the program, they rattle off all they had done at ArtWell. "I could see the joy that it brings them," she said with a broad smile. "It's that spark that you see."

Teegen recalls many ArtWell students' success stories. One young student, Youssef, was trying to come to terms with the murder of his best friend. As a coping mechanism to deal with this traumatic event, Youssef utilized poetry, an art form which he initially detested. Today, he has published several poetry books and has traveled around the world as a result of his work. Another student whose brother was shot decided to write a poem about it. And, like Youssef, a student named Marcus hated poetry until he realized he could write about skateboarding; he now has two master's degrees.

Since the pandemic, Teegen said that ArtWell has been forced to become more nimble, developing adaptable processes for various settings. She noted that, due to pandemic-imposed isolation, ArtWell has been focusing more on community building. "We would like to bring the magic that happens in classrooms into the community more."

[ArtWell](#)

By Darcy Grabenstein

February 14, 2021