

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Project Positive: Breaking the Norm

by Ellen Chenoweth

Even when he's not dancing, Damon "Dinksworth" Holley is a man in motion. It's a late summer Friday evening in West Philly, and Holley is helpfully picking up trash on the football field outside of Sayre Morris High School while explaining the philosophy behind Project Positive, a hip hop dance group he founded in 2013. At the same time, he's keeping a watchful eye on the dozen or so kids taking part in the class in progress, led by his right-hand man Antiwne Freeman. "That was ill!" pausing his narrative and shouting out in approval when a well-executed move catches his eye. "I gotta give them respect cause that was dope." Clad in bright orange and red knee socks, and matching orange shoelaces, Holley graduated from Sayre Morris in 2007, so he's in familiar territory.

Holley honed his craft through years with Philly-based Illstyle and Peace Productions, and toured with Brandon "Peace" Albright's hip hop group on a 2013 State Department sponsored tour to Belarus, the Ukraine and Russia. Inspired by the international tour and the variety of people he met while traveling, Holley wanted to begin his own project of inspiring youth through hip hop dance. It seems to be working, with Project Positive performing all over the city, both in invited performances and in the street, and a thriving youth program meeting three nights a week.

Freeman addresses the teenagers in the class, "My big ones, get the little ones." The little ones are as young as six on this particular night, and are just as willing to get in the middle of the [cipher circle](#) as anyone. There are multiple adult leaders in the circle as well, and both male and female students, everyone pulled into the same level by being part of the group. It's a community with infectious good cheer, even when dealing with challenges like being kicked out of their indoor rehearsal space at Morris Sayre Recreation Center due to a misunderstanding earlier in the evening.

The kids seem hungry and eager for instruction. A Project Positive leader who goes by the name 360 has only been with the group for a few months but his easy rapport with the kids is evident as he works with a small group of boys on their backflips, coaching one-on-one when needed. The adults wrap up the workshop a few minutes earlier than scheduled, and there are complaints from the kids, who continue to hang out and practice on their own. It's not just these kids who are hungry to dance, 360 notes, "Anytime I go to the park

and start to stretch, kids always come over and want to learn.” Holley reports that they find new students through their street performances, word of mouth, and via their popular [Instagram feed](#) (currently at nearly 4000 followers).

The live performance of about a half dozen Project Positive dancers that I caught on a Center City street, a few blocks away from City Hall, had the same irresistible good spirit and playfulness that I observed in the kids class. Holley trained with an established street performer in New York in technique for the street, and the timing and rhythm of the group’s street show, along with their dance chops, made for a polished performance. A police officer approached on a bicycle to break up the show, and the MC/dancer announced without missing a beat, “Ladies and gentlemen, give it up for Philadelphia’s finest!” The officer sheepishly acknowledged the applause and Project Positive quickly but smoothly wrapped up their act.

One thing Holley loves about hip hop dance is that anyone can do it, black, white, male, female: “If you can walk and talk at the same time, you can dance. So we may start with just ‘lift your leg and put your chest out at the same time.’” Surrounded by these kids who seem to have been coached into fearlessness and having a ball, it’s a pretty persuasive pitch.

He goes on to give a definition of his form, “Breakdancing, or breaking, is about breaking the norm, is about breaking what people might think about you.” Project Positive makes this explicit in their street performances, instructing viewers, “Don’t be scared of the black guys,” while pulling up their shirts to reveal their torsos, “we are unarmed!” Holley says, “Some people get uptight around black men, so we just use humor to reach people. We tell knock knock jokes for the kids, whatever it takes.”

Holley dreams about Project Positive being a tourist attraction, a performance that every visitor to Philly should catch while they’re in town. It’s a lofty goal, but it doesn’t seem that far-fetched. In the meantime, you can catch them this Saturday for the grand opening celebration at the Drum Duel in Dilworth Park, the newly created park just west of City Hall.

Project Positive, *Dilworth Park Grand Opening Celebrations*, Drum Duel in Dilworth Park, September 6, 5-8pm. Free.

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