



VOCATIONAL DANCE PROGRAM COMBINES CREATIVE EXPRESSION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In the moments before “Can’t Stop the Feeling” starts to play through the speakers, the members of BHMA’s vocational dance program, SHINE, stand motionless, on the edge of movement. When the first notes of the song fill the room, the dancers suddenly come to life—swaying to the beat, following the steps of their choreography, and brimming with self-assurance. As they switch positions around the bright coral-colored Dance & Movement Studio, their gazes remain focused on the mirrors that span the width of the room. The seven dancers use their reflections to study the shape of their movements and observe how their parts connect to the larger piece. Instructor Mary Ann Holmes looks on approvingly as she surveys the progress the group has made in just a few short months. Under her direction, the vocational dance program began in earnest over the summer—giving students who have a passion and talent for movement an opportunity to pursue dance as a vocational path and to share it with the community.

SHINE grew out of a desire to add movement to the growing list of vocational options offered as part of our LIVE Program, a long-term option for graduates of our two-year program. Drawing from her extensive experience as a choreographer and special needs educator, Holmes coaches students through rehearsals, performances, and everything in between. In addition to private lessons, the group meets three mornings a week to learn and practice choreography—exploring genres like modern, hip hop, and Broadway jazz, and working on songs that include “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” and “Chim Chim Cher-ee.” Holmes also mixes in key lessons about job and social skills each week. Though dance is a personal art form, it is rooted in core values like having a strong work ethic and working as a team. As a group they discuss the importance of showing up for work, identify strategies

to de-stress, and set short-term and long-term goals. Holmes also demonstrates how to be a professional dancer as students practice greeting, interacting with, and receiving praise from audience members. LIVE member Josiah Alicea considers the work “pretty hard,” but embodies the spirit of the lessons, saying “I’ll still keep growing and keep trying.”

SHINE is “a program designed with the foundation and benefits of movement arts.” For ten years Holmes has taught yoga, Dance Ensemble, and Zumba at BHMA, helping students to develop their spatial awareness, coordination, and body mechanics in an engaging way. Every other week SHINE brings the advantages of dance to the broader community—reflected in the program’s mission to inspire audiences to move along with the group. For many SHINE members, sharing their enthusiasm for movement is among the most rewarding parts of the program. After they perform their set at a local elder care community center, they invite the crowd to join their group movement segment. The dancers lead the audience through a sequence of exercises that aim to stimulate, stretch, and energize the mind and body together. “The response has been nothing less than amazing,” writes Holmes. As she explains, audiences are quickly captivated by the performers and eagerly join in—a testament to the power of movement.

Each day Alicea, Tim Daniels, Ben Krifka, Andrea Leombruno, Paige Phillips, Heather Silva, and Carly Ziemba channel their passion for dance into a meaningful vocational opportunity centered around creative expression and community engagement. From rehearsals in the studio, to performances in the area, they use movement as a platform to grow their independence and showcase their abilities. Getting paid to

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This time of year provides us with the opportunity to take inventory of our blessings, as well as reflect on all that has happened over the past twelve months. We are grateful for the continued generosity of our donors, who make it possible for us to develop innovative and inclusive programs for those we serve. Your support empowers our staff to engineer new ways to capture the unique strengths and talents of our individuals.

For the past two years the Ascending Artist Program has allowed students to pursue art as a vocational track. In BHMA's off-campus studio, participants use a wide range of visual mediums to express their creativity and grow their job skills. Their finished pieces have been sold at art shows, private gallery showings, and local businesses.

We are thrilled to announce the launch of Connected Creators, an e-commerce website where you can view and purchase a variety of items made as part of our Ascending Artist Program. Notecards, scarves, ceramic ornaments, coasters, and more will be available for sale starting December 1. The website brings the art show experience to you.

Connected Creators emerged from the success of our vocational art program and the desire to make its products more widely accessible. BHMA, as the designer and owner of the site, is working in collaboration with two other local organizations to provide a modern online marketplace for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to showcase and sell their art. We aspire to grow the number of participating organizations and artists!

Visit connectedcreators.net to explore the world of creation at BHMA and learn more about the students behind the artwork. In addition to highlighting the many talents of our individuals, the website also fosters their entrepreneurial spirit, as artists keep the profits from the sale of their work. This initiative offers additional vocational opportunities for our program participants as well, including managing inventory, processing orders, and shipping packages.

We hope that you take a moment this season to visit the Connected Creators website and see the inspiring work of our artists and the staff who support them.

WISHING YOU A WONDERFUL HOLIDAY AND HEALTHY NEW YEAR,

MICHELLE N. THEROUX
Executive Director

FRANK ORLANDO
Chair of the Board



BHMA OPENS NEW GROUP HOME IN COMMUNITY

On a Friday afternoon in early autumn, Travis Dobson, Brian Krutzler, and their families unloaded boxes, set up bedrooms, and stocked the kitchen cabinets. Together they were moving Dobson and Krutzler into Berkshire Hills Music Academy's newest group home—marking a personal rite of passage and an organizational milestone. Set on a quiet, tree-lined street in nearby Hadley, the four-bedroom residence offers “a supported living environment for our residents...[and] expands our housing options for individuals wanting to stay at BHMA and live in the community,” writes Executive Director Michelle Theroux. The process to obtain the house began more than a year ago as part of an ongoing partnership with the Franklin/Hampshire Department of Developmental Services (DDS) area office. Following the initial conversations, BHMA's board of trustees approved the project and Theroux located a suitable house. The new residence, which is funded by DDS, provides Dobson, Krutzler, and future residents with a space to navigate living in a home with others, increase their independence, and participate in the surrounding community.

House Manager Eric Whittle oversees everything at the group home, both the skill building and the recreational elements. As he explains, staff members offer personalized assistance and guidance to address the goals outlined in each resident's Individual Support Plan (ISP). From cooking meals and taking trips to the grocery store, to doing laundry and shaving, Dobson and Krutzler get hands-on experience in an array of skills; Whittle compares it to “an everyday crash course on living independently.” Building connections among residents is another priority for Whittle—he promotes activities like group hikes at Skinner Mountain, games of mini golf, and sporting events at UMass Amherst. These outings allow Dobson and Krutzler to get to know each other and engage with the Pioneer Valley. Whittle also organizes weekly dinners, where all house members come together to cook and share a meal. As additional residents move in after the new year, Whittle expects the feeling of family and the impact of the house to only grow.



Our SOMA soccer team ended its season in early November with a strong showing at the State Cup in Byfield.



Clinical support promotes the emotional well-being of each individual at BHMA. LIVE member Jen Barrett is seen here meeting with Clinician Maddie Mercier.



Weekly trips to Dakin Humane Society allow students like Will Colby to establish basic work & social skills and give back to their community.



LIVE member Etienne Perley's debut album, *Alma Andina*, blends his strong vocals and signature panpipes and is now available for purchase at incanuna.com.

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dance and share the benefits of movement instills in SHINE members an “expanded sense of self and possibility,” asserts Holmes, who sees “them work against the stigma of limitation and excel in ways they didn’t know they were capable of.” She also credits the vocational dance program with highlighting the value of non-traditional work settings for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and educating “the public about the capacity these students have.” For Holmes, seeing how group members radiate joy when they move and how audiences have fully embraced the program and the dancers is simply “magical.”

A NIGHT AT THE OSCARS RECAP

The stars were shining bright on September 28 as BHMA held its sixth annual on-campus fundraising event, “A Night at the Oscars.” Over 200 partygoers arrived on the warm fall evening to celebrate our program in true Hollywood style—donning posh gowns and dapper suits, walking the red carpet, and posing for paparazzi photos. Guests gathered together to experience our mission in action, listening as LIVE members Jen Barrett and Mark Palardy delivered moving personal speeches followed by Justin Scott’s poignant performance of “If the World Only Knew.” The Troupe then kicked off a night of dancing with their Oscars-inspired set, including numbers like “Footloose” and “Let the River Run.” “A Night at the Oscars” raised critical funds to continue providing quality programming for our growing community. Special thanks to our top sponsors: the Bernon Family, Patti & Frank Connor, Susanna Peyton & John Campbell, Rosemary & Justin McCormack, PeoplesBank, and Webber & Grinnell Insurance.

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