

A COMMUNITY WELL CHOREOGRAPHED

On a sunny February morning, six young women from Westchester Enriched Sciences Magnet (WESM) walked confidently on stage. Perfectly in step, they took their places and prepared to debut four original dance works exploring the empowerment of women and girls worldwide.



Their journey had begun six weeks prior, at the start of the Skirball's in-school dance residency inspired by *Women Hold Up Half the Sky*. During the immersive program, the students had worked closely with renowned local choreographer and dance educator Robin Conrad. Together with our staff educators, they toured the exhibition, grappled with the complex issues it raised, and sought to celebrate the spirit of women through creative movement. After six weeks of journaling, discussion, improvisation, choreography, and rehearsals, the residency was now culminating in a performance at the Skirball for fellow students, faculty, and family.

Also in the audience were members of the Downtown Women's Center (DWC)—dedicated to serving the needs of homeless and low-income women in downtown's Skid Row—with whom we had connected the teens to ground the project in local community. The contingent belonged to a DWC writers' group known as the DIVAS (or, Dames Interested in Very Authentic Stories). Their personal statements about womanhood had deeply moved their six mentees and even served as a soundtrack to one of the dances.

As the lights went down and the music began to play, the excitement in the room was palpable. One dance after the other, the budding artists per-

A school outreach program forges lasting bonds between students, teachers, and community members.



Sara Kahlberg



Top left: Combining modern, lyrical, and hip-hop choreography, the young women move in harmony with one another. Top right: During a rehearsal, dance educator Robin Conrad and residency participant Isianna Burgess exchange ideas with a laugh. Above: Beaming with pride after their outstanding performance, the dancers pose with their teachers and the DIVAS group of the Downtown Women's Center. All photos by Bonnie Perkinson unless noted otherwise.

formed with grace, skill, and feeling. After a standing ovation, congratulations, hugs, and bouquets of flowers were generously exchanged.

Later, the dancers were asked what impact the residency had on them. One by one, the teens spoke of coming together with their "sisters," as they'd come to describe each other.

To them, they hadn't just created a series of dances but a community, one that developed a strong sense of duty to one another and society. Reflecting upon the women profiled in the exhibition as well as the DIVAS, tenth-grader Lyric Behn tearfully remarked, "This experience has really changed how I feel about not just myself but everybody.... It really made me think, 'What am I capable of? What can we do to help other people in a bad situation?'"

This transformation in the girls' world view inspired everyone in the room, especially their peers. The residency had communicated an important message: that we have the responsibility to help make the world a better place, and that by collaborating with one another, we can create something greater than ourselves.

L.A. Unified School District's Arts Specialist Judi Garratt, who attended the performance, said: "It's obvious that they not only had a wonderfully positive experience but that it changed their lives. They will be better citizens of the world as a result of this opportunity."