

CULTURE CENTRAL, INC.

Dance Builds Lives™

Women and children's African Dance program for special populations



Dance Builds Lives™

Since 1986 the number of African American women behind bars increased 800%.ⁱ

Culture Central Incorporated, is a new nonprofit organization, incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia. It was founded by a group of individuals who have over twenty years experience participating in dance and other activities relating to African culture. The mission of Culture Central is to provide arts and humanities related programming for adults and children to learn about African culture and heritage.

The organization is committed to offering programming which touches the community in a meaningful way. The staggering increase in the rate of incarceration of African American females and the connected issue of drug use is a concern to the whole Metro DC community. The rapid rate of incarceration is tearing at the fabric of African American families in the community and therefore dramatically affects the community. Culture Central, Inc. is uniquely situated to offer a program which would be a valuable addition to services available to help women address problems which prevent them from becoming stable and productive members within our communities.

The organization has created a program that will help women address physical, psychological and mental awareness in an attempt to keep them from starting or relapsing into the negative behavior that lead them down the path of incarceration. The program based on dance movement is called Dance Builds Lives™ (DBL) and will help address the needs of women of color who have or have recently been incarcerated and women who are in drug recovery. Music and dance have been and continue to be integral components of the social fabric of black communities through out the Diaspora. The African American community has a rich dance heritage that is reflected in all aspects of life from strictly social activity to religious and spiritual life. Therefore, movement to music and dance will seem familiar and comforting to the program participants.

Through the use of dance movement Culture Central will provide the tools for the women to gain and develop better awareness and respect for their bodies, and to help develop healthier life styles. Dance movement programs incorporate dance classes with an instructor who will teach the participants the history, songs/language, costuming and custom for the dance. These classes will be taught by experienced practitioners whose skills include working with special populations.

Because many incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and/or women in recovery are also mothers there are a great number of children who are also effected by the increased rates of incarceration of women through separation from their mothers. The children of incarcerated women also suffer from self esteem issues and are often at greater risk of abuse. An added benefit of DBL is that its selected professionals have working experience with both adults and children. Culture Central envisions that the DBL program can also be helpful to the children of these women.

Why is there a need for DBL?

The rise in the rate of incarcerated African American women is really two tales. One speaks simply to the increased number of women from our communities who are currently in jails, prisons and under correctional supervision, such as probation or house arrest. The other tale is the reason why women end up incarcerated and addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Between 1986 and 1999 and continuing to the present, the number of women incarcerated in the United States has increased by a startling 888%.ⁱⁱ There are currently 1,000,000 women (twice the size of the population of the District) under some form of correctional supervision in this country.

- Many women who are incarcerated have been the victims of physical or sexual abuse prior to entering prison. Of those reporting abuse 69% reported that the abuse occurred before they reached the age of 16.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Nearly 2/3 of women confined in local jails and state and federal prisons are minority, black, Hispanic and other races. Forty Four percent of women in local jails are black, 48% in state prisons are black and 35% in federal prisons are black. For Hispanic women 15% are in local jails, 15% in state prisons and 32% in federal prison.^{iv}
- In the District of Columbia, there are approximately 1,300 women in the combined custody of federal corrections and local facilities. This figure is the same as the entire population of DC's largest high school. Over 97% of the inmates incarcerated in DC are black.^v
- Maryland has nearly 1,200 women incarcerated and Virginia has over 2,000.^{vi}

About half of women offenders in state prisons had been using alcohol, drugs or both at the time of the offense for which they had been incarcerated. Women reported higher drug use than found among male offenders. It has been established that many mothers with substance abuse issues are generally victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Incarcerated women who are separated from their children face emotional trauma and frequently suffer from loneliness, depression and despair. For women with substance abuse issues, these traumas often trigger the urge to use drugs.

Approximately 7 out of 10 women under correctional control have minor children. Women under supervision by the justice system agencies were mothers of an estimated 1.3 million minor children. In most cases, when a woman is imprisoned, her child is displaced. Children whose fathers are incarcerated are three times more likely to live with the other parent than when their mothers are incarcerated. Ten percent of children with incarcerated mothers in state prisons are in foster homes and 79% live with a grandparent or relative.^{vii}

A study conducted by the University of Chicago Irving B. Harris School of Public Policy Studies estimated that it costs \$25,000 a year to house a women in prison and an additional \$25,000 for each child of an incarcerated mother placed in foster care. That is a total of \$50,000 a year for each family that enters both the prison and child welfare system. To put it in a local context, 5 women could complete a four year degree program at the University of the District of Columbia for \$50,000. In comparison, drug treatment costs range between \$1,800 for regular out-patient services and \$6,800 for long term residential services for regular out-patient services and \$6,800 for long term residential services for clients. It costs seven times more to imprison a woman than to provide treatment services. The Rand Corporation found that for every dollar allotted to treatment, tax payers save almost \$8 in social costs. Studies show that comprehensive treatment of women and their families is more effective in reducing drug related offenses and in increasing the amount of time mothers remained drug free, yet existing treatment meets less than one third of the women's needs.

Every two years over 300 women are released from custody and begin the process of trying to re-establish themselves in their communities. In addition, there are 14,805 women in the District who admit to using illicit drugs and/or alcohol.

How can DBL help?

While Culture Central cannot solve all of the women's problems, we strive to use dance to promote personal growth, health and well-being. Since the 1920's professionals have recognized that dance can be harnessed as a therapeutic tool and used to help treat emotional, cognitive and physical problems.^{viii} On a purely physical level dance provides the benefits of exercise, improved health and well being, conditioning and muscle tone. On an emotional level dance can provide joyful feelings and confidence. The physical challenge and exertion of dance can allow the women to express emotions such as anger, frustration and loss in a positive way. African dance, in particular, addresses the physical, mental and spiritual needs of an individual and the community. African dance has resources in spirituality where a traditional belief system recognizes that ritual movement can help heal individuals. According to dance experts "African dance is closely linked to the culture as a means of recording history, reaffirming community and celebrating links between those present and those departed – ancestors. The dance (and music) function as mnemonic devices (tools to stimulate the memory) so that historic data can be stored through dance, song and music. In the west we tend to view dance as recreational versus spiritual. Western dance tends to focus on the individual rather than on the group. This is a major difference. The use of the torso and ground is also profound as African dance (in general) does not struggle to appear light and ethereal but rather there is a deep connection to the earth – earthbound and rooted."^x African dance is dramatic, animated, spiritual and verbal. It educates as it tells a story and builds bridges between communities and cultures.

Dance Therapy has been successful in helping survivors of sexual abuse work through issues of shame, guilt intimacy and personal power. In particular dance movement was found to help these survivors reconnect with their bodies and to gain a better acceptance and care of their bodies.^x This is the goal of the Dance Builds Lives™ program.

Culture Central has African dance trained professionals who have expertise in working with special populations, such as individuals with substance abuse and mental health issues. Culture Central can help close the gap in treatment needs of women recovering from substance abuse and in the provision of services to both incarcerated women as well as those recently released.

Through the Dance Builds Lives™ program we offer women an opportunity, in a private environment to gain acceptance of their bodies, to connect with their feelings and to use the challenge of physical movement to help channel feelings of anger and aggression. They will learn to build connections between regular exercise and good health, thereby helping them to become more stable and healthy members of the community. In addition, they will begin to form bonds and relationships with the instructor and other women who dance with them. These relationships will help provide the women with additional sources of support to assist them in positive decision making.

Funding Requirements

Culture Central is seeking to raise \$25,000 in funding to run DBL for two years. The program will initially be offered at three sites where the women receive treatment or services. In that way the program will be convenient to the women. It is anticipated that in the first year the program will be offered at one facility for recently released women and two locations for women in recovery. We have budgeted studio rental for one class for children. It is anticipated the children's class can accommodate up to twenty children. Each of the women's classes can comfortably accommodate 20-25 women. It is anticipated that the program will eventually be offered in the local jail however it will take some time to gain approval from the correctional authorities. Therefore, in jail services will not be offered until the second year. The budget was adjusted to reflect an increased cost in the second year to cover the additional use of the service provider's time.

Presently there are approximately fifteen sites in the District offering services to women in recovery, women who are homeless, women being sheltered from domestic violence or women recently released. Culture Central views each of these populations as being suitable for the DBL program. There is great possibility of growth for the program once it is established.

Measuring Our Success

One of the goals of DBL is to help the women develop healthier lifestyles through regular exercise. The program will track the women's attendance through the use of sign up sheets, which will allow the program to monitor which women attend and the frequency of their attendance.

Secondly, the basic steps of each dance will be taught and then they will be placed in sequence to create basic choreography. It is anticipated that at the end of each session the women will be able to perform a choreographed routine. The women's increased level of confidence will enable those who have participated in the program for a year to put on a performance for other women at the treatment sites.

Dancer students will demonstrate the following movement skills at the end of the ten week session:

- (a) Alignment, balance, intimation of movement, articulation of isolated body parts, weight shift, elevation and landing, fall and recovery
- (b) Accurately identify and demonstrate basic dance steps, positions and patterns for dance from two different styles or traditions.
- (c) Accurately transfer a rhythmic pattern from the aural to the kinesthetic. Also, accurately transfer spatial patten from the visual to the kinesthetic.
- (d) Identify and clearly demonstrate a range of dynamics/movement qualities.
- (e) Demonstrate increasing kinesthetic awareness, concentration and focus in performing movement skills.
- (f) Describe the action and movement elements observed in a dance, using appropriate movements dance vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

It is beyond dispute that more needs to be done to shore up the most fragile members of the community. Culture Central's Dance Builds Lives™ program adds a vibrant new tool in the holistic approach to helping recently incarcerated women and women in drug recovery.

- ⁱ Lenora Lapidus, et al., CAUGHT IN THE NET: THE IMPACT OF DRUG POLICIES ON WOMEN AND FAMILIES (2004)
- ⁱⁱ Id.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Greenfeld & Snell, BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS SPECIAL REPORT: WOMEN OFFENDERS (1999)
- ^{iv} Id.
- ^v DC Department of Corrections Facts and Figures 2006.
- ^{vi} Greenfeld & Snell, WOMEN OFFENDERS.
- ^{vii} Id.
- ^{viii} Dance therapy developed out of the modern dance trend. Today there are several dance therapy institutes such as the American Dance Therapy Association and the International Institute of Dance Therapy. There are also graduate degrees offered in the field.
- ^{ix} Ferne Caulker, Founder Ko-Thi African Dance Company

- ^x See for example Letty J. Mills & Judith C. Daniluk, Her Body Speaks: The Experience of Dance Therapy for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, Journal of Counseling & Development, Winter 2002, Vol. 80:77

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