

KAREN AGUIAR

Story of Karen

There are at least two ways to think about dance: first, as one body moving in space, responding to a rhythm, internal or external. Another, as bodies in conversation with each other, responding to and learning from each other, making something together that's greater than the sum of the individual parts. The story of Go Dance For Change, the cross-cultural platform I started in 2018, is about these two kinds of movements.

I've moved in many ways my whole life, and specifically from age 9, when a sports scholarship as a Rhythmic Gymnast brought me to access spaces I wouldn't have the opportunity. And performing in Brazil at schools, charities, council and community parties, halftime shows at national basketball games and parks in my hometown. Growing up in such a melting pot of personalities and structures taught me to adapt, communicate and connect no matter the context, and when the first working class president in Brazil's history was elected in 2003, I seized on the new opportunities his presidency created – like the ability to apply to go to college – in order to broaden my own horizons as someone coming from the same background. Ten years later I was going to the US to improve my English and job prospects, becoming an interpreter and dancer in China, returning from time to time to Brazil. I never stopped moving, working and volunteering in different kinds of jobs, in community radio, as a magazine editor, an au pair, a waitress, a farm caretaker, a recreation assistant at a hospital for children in cancer treatment. Through it all, I danced. I danced with the children, and I danced with new friends I met everywhere I went. Dance has been a big part of how I navigate the world, even if it's rarely been my primary job or source of income.

Then in 2016 one short trip to Ireland changed everything. I had come to visit friends intending to spend just one week here, but when I found myself at a social space with music, dance and people from all over the world - the joy, multiculturalism, friendship, love, and sense of belonging sealed my fate, and I moved here.

There were only two problems: one, that that first week was in the spring, and a lot of the year in Ireland is not spring. And the second one is that it's hard to make everyday life feel like that event (which doesn't stop me from trying!). Two winters in, I started to feel deeply sad and unmotivated, and thanks to a therapist, I came to understand that movement and connection were deep and non-negotiable needs for my mental health.

So in the summer of 2018, when I found a few dance facilitators running sparse classes, I started promoting them to bring in my friends and other people, eventually producing my 1st dance session of a friend who moved to Ireland to learn English and teach Dancehall classes. This was the beginning of the Go Dance for Change Instagram page that worked like a gathering place for everyone who was interested to collaborate to create social spaces.

Story of us

Most rhythms of modern popular dance originated in Africa and from the African diaspora in the Americas. Dance is a universal language, it's a feeling, and there is no right or wrong. You can be from anywhere and get together to listen to music, dance and hang out. Present. Being part of these classes changed my life, and as I found myself again, I could see the bigger picture again and work towards how to bring more people together. Eventually bringing Sabrina Gringa to teach Brazilian Funk Dance to full room, running

day-long workshops on Twerk, Afro-Brazilian and Dancehall, and bringing dance together with climate action, intersectionality, body positivity and integration.

Getting involved in climate justice work can make you feel so small, and the pandemic manifested a lot of that helplessness. But this time, when the feelings of burnout, defeat and grief started, my dance friends motivated me to keep going, and so the Go Dance for Change community continued online, meeting and dancing together. We ran almost 50 classes, from Hip Hop, Street Jazz, Indian classical dance, Belly Dance, Brazilian Funk, Afro Dance, Reggaeton to Twerk. We even produced two international online dance showcases, with more than 40 people in May 2020, and in October we ran an event in collaboration with World Fusion Crew, presenting around 20 performances online to raise money for the Children's Cancer Centre of Lebanon after the horrible explosions of 2020.

Our community extended beyond our geographical boundaries and even beyond the living, as we connected to our African roots fundraising for Masaka Kids Afrikana, and also online Samhain celebrations, paying respect to ancestors and raising funds to support Brazilian indigenous community movements and the massive fires in Brazil.

Finally, through Go Dance for Change, I could feel the threads that were always there between my cultures of origin, in Brasil, African and Indigenous ancestral roots, and the place where I now lived.

Story of now

When the Go Dance For Change platform started in 2018 we focused on rhythms originating in Africa and from the African diaspora in the Americas, placing a strong emphasis on wellbeing, community building and female empowerment. We aimed to honour diverse cultures and people, showing the contexts in which popular dance styles were formed, in order to begin to decolonise narratives within the dance scene in Ireland, meaning to see dance as a point of connection, and not just as something taken from other cultures and rebranded.

I founded the platform because I needed dance and I needed community, but, having worked with so many different organisations, like the Mother Tongues Festival, Dublin Pride, World Fusion Crew, Dublin City Council Social Inclusion Week, Social Impact Ireland, Tallaght Community Arts, Culture Night, and so many other events and groups, now I see how much can be built on that foundation. Responding to my own deep need for dance has had a transformative potential to unite people and nurture collective space to build power from below. This is one great example of what power-with collective action looks like, built on respect, mutual support, solidarity, motivation and empowerment.

I have a lot to learn about how to do all this sustainably, how not to burn out, and how to make sure the power and knowledge we build continues, and some of this has to do with learning how to build social enterprise structures, and not try to carry the weight of everything myself. As I am now producing with a former national Brazilian Rhythmic Gymnast who moved to Ireland less than six months ago, something is coming full circle, thinking back to my early years in Brazil. I am channelling my Sports & Arts passions, had worked recently with the Rhythmic Gymnastics coach for Sports Against Racism Ireland and sharing and connecting with people also inspired to create and work towards a better reality for themselves and others.