

Students of Project Moves



# Dancing with Purpose

Anti-bullying programs that aim to start a conversation and stop the violence

BY MARY ELLEN HUNT

Teased, taunted, and left out, the Ugly Duckling is an unhappy loner in Robert Mills' 2005 ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen story. The scenes performed in *The Ugly Duckling* are no fairy tale, though—it's a reality that anyone who has ever been picked on will recognize in an instant.

Ballet saves the Ugly Duckling in Mills' staging: She stumbles into a dance class and realizes that she has, in fact, been a graceful swan all along. It's

a touching ending that resonates with kids, according to Mills. But the Oklahoma City Ballet artistic director notes that there are more serious undertones. "*The Ugly Duckling* came from my own experiences growing up feeling alone and isolated," he says. As a gay man growing up in a Chicago suburb, Mills says he was constantly picked on. "Even when you're young, bullies have a sense that you're different—you have a sense that you're different, even if you don't

know how. And the fact that I grew up studying dance made it even worse."

In recent years, teen suicides highlighted in the media have focused the nation's attention on the problem of bullying. Some states, like Oklahoma, have mandated anti-bullying educational programming in schools, and 49 states have anti-bullying laws on their books. As *The Ugly Duckling* demonstrates, dancers and dance educators can take a stand and heighten awareness of this sensitive and poignant issue in communities. From outreach programs to online videos and even appearances on shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, the dance world is providing platforms for discussion and helping to direct change.

## THE UGLY DUCKLING

After Mills choreographed *The Ugly Duckling* for Ballet Nouveau Colorado in 2005, the company worked with the anti-bullying organization Creating Caring Communities to transform the ballet into an interactive performance to take into schools throughout the Denver area. Julia Wilkinson Manley, who directed Ballet Nouveau Colorado's school, brought the ballet to schools. She notes that post-show activities, such as writing, drawing, and discussions in which kids process what they've seen, really hit home. In one exercise, for instance, dancers replay three scenes of bullying from the ballet, showing what others could have done to make things better and helping to give kids a blueprint to fight the bystander mentality.

*The Ugly Duckling* program has been so successful—over 20,000 schoolchildren in Denver alone have seen it—

## Move This World

Peer-to-peer mentoring is one of the essential aspects of the Junior PeaceMover program part of the Move This World organization. Created by former dancer Sara Potler LaHayne in 2007, MTW is dedicated to promoting conflict resolution strategies through movement-based programs in 22 cities around the world. MTW's high school curriculum is designed to use exercises that help students develop leadership skills and learn ways to cope in the moment with bullying, says LaHayne.

"We use strategies represented through movement, like 'meeting someone halfway,' or take five deep breaths and walk away," she says. "It's not just about not being bully or victim, you need to know how to respond and not be a bystander either."

More info: [www.movethisworld.org](http://www.movethisworld.org).

Baltimore students benefit from Move This World.



"Members of the dance field can use the skills, wisdom, and talent they have to make an impact."

—GINA GIBNEY

that it has been transplanted to Dance Theatre of Tennessee in Nashville, and will soon be at Oklahoma City Ballet.

Today, Wilkinson Manley, now head of the recently renamed Colorado Conservatory of Dance, is working with Sarah Jannsen, a member of the Conservatory's student company, on implementing a new anti-bullying workshop, "It All Starts Somewhere." The work will tour elementary schools in the area, and they hope the pop music and familiar setting will hit even closer to home with students. ▶

### "It Gets Better"

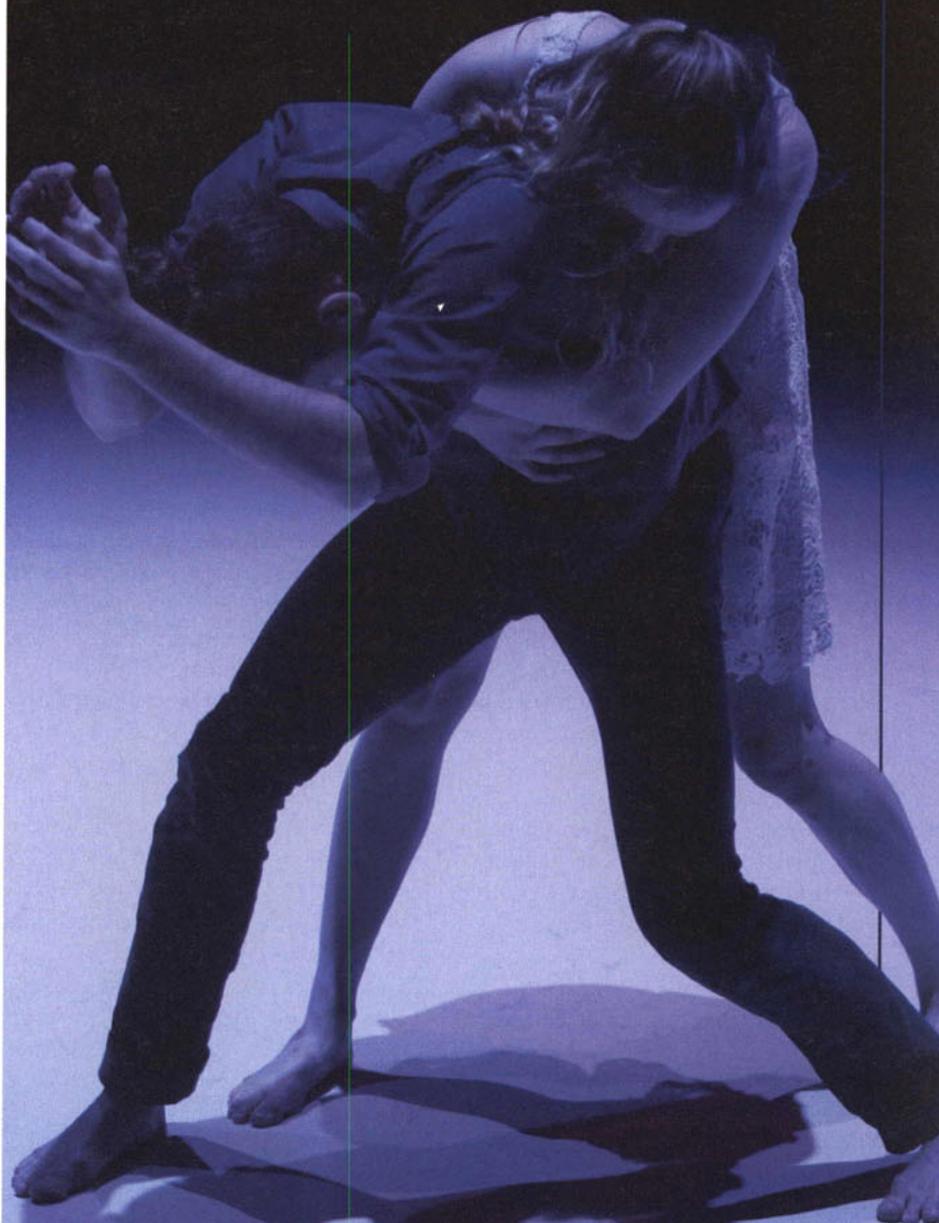
Choreographer Gina Gibney has always envisioned the Gibney Dance Center in New York as connecting the dance world with community action. Though her own work has largely focused on the issue of domestic violence, she was also inspired by Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project to address the issue of bullying. Working with a group including Dance/NYC, choreographer Sydney Skybetter, and arts advocate Tim Cynova, Gibney put out a call for artists to come to her studios to record video testimonials of support and empowerment to LGBT youth. Nearly two dozen videos were made and posted to YouTube, including one in which 28 artists, like Stephen Petronio and Larry Keigwin, share a group message of hope and acceptance.

"When we opened the center I realized that we had a tremendous opportunity to explore how members of the dance field can use the skills, wisdom, and talent they have to really make an impact," she says. "This was a really emotional experience for so many people, and I was so moved by the genuine nature of the project." More info: [www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org).

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