



**Left:** Roni Cheesman.  
Photo: Christian Cheesman.

# My Dance-Africa adventure

Freelance dance practitioner **Roni Cheesman** retraces some of her steps as an ADAD Trailblazer



**Above:** WPAS's Summer Steps with Step Afrika! Photo: Jeremy Norwood.

“Stepping, even in its most basic form, is beautiful and mesmerising. There’s an entire culture around it embodying community responsibility, teamwork and self-development that I found both inspiring and challenging...”



**Above left and right:** Participant in Dance Africa project. Photo: Christian Cheesman.

### **My passion for community dance really began in 1998. I**

was in the second year of a Politics and International Relations degree at Portsmouth University when my flatmate convinced me to join her at a dance audition for Maria Stylianou’s hip hop dance group, Southzone. We both made it into the company, but after a year of performing I applied for a placement in Southzone’s teacher training initiative. There I was mentored by Maria and observed her work with young people at risk of social exclusion. Her energy, technical knowledge and humility allowed Maria to engage the most hardened of angry teenagers, complete with defiantly folded arms and cynically raised eyebrows. In doing so she enabled them to view themselves differently – that is, in a more positive light.

My original strategic plan of a career within the Foreign Office came to an abrupt end as I, too, began to learn the healing art of dance. I continued to specialise in street dance, but also began to explore how my African identity can creatively feed into it through the development of what I call ‘afro-street.’ I’ve now spent seven years working as both a community dance practitioner and manager. I deliver dance within schools and pupil referral units, and have been Community & Learning Manager for the national dance agency South East Dance. There I also gained a dance teacher training certificate in ‘dance, the arts, and social inclusion.’

### **Blazing a trail**

I’m driven by a belief that dance and creativity can be constructive tools for self-expression regardless of one’s social and economic context. In 2007 I founded Dance-Africa, which aims to facilitate creative projects for disadvantaged communities in Zambia while supporting self-help initiatives connected with those communities. Dance-Africa also hosts Celebrate-Africa, an annual film and youth dance platform that gives young people from the South East region the opportunity to creatively engage with

topical issues faced by Zambian street children.

In 2008 I successfully applied for an Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD) Trailblazers fellowship grant, a programme that has supported more than 30 artists from around the UK since 2003. My objective with the grant was two-fold: to continue to explore the fusion between street dance and African movement, and to widen the vision of my company, Dance-Africa.

My year under the auspices of Trailblazers was exhausting emotionally and physically, but also hugely rewarding. Firstly, it gave me an opportunity to develop my dance practice and delivery. My aim was to explore the link between the polyrhythmic ‘stepping’ movement, in which the body is used as an instrument to create intricate rhythms and sounds through a combination of footsteps, claps and spoken word, and the gumboot dancing that originated from the tough working conditions in South Africa’s gold mines. Historically, stepping is a ritual created and practiced by African-American students in fraternities and sororities in the early 1900s. It grew out of a long and rich tradition in African-based communities that uses movement, words and sounds to communicate allegiance to a group. Although traditionally aligned with colleges, the art form is highly appealing to young people on a broader basis and can be found in high, middle and elementary schools across America, as well as in churches and community-based organisations.

The grant afforded me the opportunity for a week-long intensive with the first Zambian Afro-contemporary dance company, Namakanjanie. Based in Lusaka, the company specialises in sub-Saharan dance forms including the gumboot dance. Thanks to Trailblazers I also made contact with Brian Williams, director of Step Afrika! He facilitated my week-long teacher-assistant placement in Washington D.C. at the Washington Performing Arts Society’s (WPAS) Summer Steps with Step Afrika! programme. Step Afrika! is the first professional company in the world dedicated to

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**Above:** Hip Hops Most Wanted performing at Celebrate Africa 2009 event. Photo: Christian Cheesman.

the tradition of stepping and annually it joins forces with the WPAS to deliver a summer camp focused on stepping styles and history. Students learn about the distinctions of African-American fraternities and sororities (such as their commitment to leadership and community service) as well as their signature 'step' (the main step or chant that proclaims the organisation's history).

The WPAS/Step Afrika! summer school culminated in a tour to a college where students witness stepping on campus. Stepping, even in its most basic form, is beautiful and mesmerising. There's an entire culture around it embodying community responsibility, teamwork and self-development that I found both inspiring and challenging – and not just because I learnt first-hand how painfully obvious it can be when you're out of line with sixty other steppers who are all in rhythm. All, that is, except you.

As part of the Washington programme I was also able to deliver an afro-street workshop to the elementary, junior and high school groups at the summer school camp. I remember having a split-second's feeling of inadequacy as I sat watching the fabulously manicured youths I was about to teach queue up for their lunch and then spontaneously break into a powerfully melodic rendition of the Oh Happy Day, complete with seamless choreography. I was teaching this group in forty-five minutes! What could I offer creatively to this new version of the cast of Fame that they didn't already know or might even want? Thankfully

they turned out to be gracious students who readily engaged with the mix of locking and tribal choreography I was bringing them.

Trailblazers allowed me to invest valuable time in advancing my goals for Dance-Africa through the provision of both a mentor and life-coaching sessions. Although the afro-street dance concept is still a work-in-progress, I now feel much more confident in exploring the connection between the tribal and the urban beat. I'm also much better equipped now to develop other plans and partnerships. Dance-Africa has formed an alliance with the CRED Foundation, a UK-based charity, which will ultimately enable groups of young people from Britain to travel to Zambia and deliver creative projects and community activities. I have also been building or strengthening relationships with Zambian host organisations such as the Chisomo Street-Children Drop-in Centre, as well as with local artists and practitioners who will be key to ensuring the sustainability of company projects there.

Without Trailblazers much of the work and research I've done, and the connections I've been making, might not have been possible. Still, a lot can be said for having an incredibly gracious husband capable of multi-tasking a full-time job with looking after our baby boy as his wife travels the world in search of inspiration!

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