

# Breaking barriers

**Chaz Bonnar**, aka ChazB, is a 23-year-old international videographer and dancer from Glasgow. In 2014, he was the youngest person to be awarded a Travelling Fellowship by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust as his research took him to the US to learn how Breaking and Hip Hop culture benefits young people from deprived backgrounds

**It has been nine months since I completed my Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship.** Starting from New York City, for eight weeks I travelled to Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles, Houston and Orlando. These places were chosen for having the most influential dance scenes for Breaking in America, although I also intended events in Philadelphia and San Diego.

In these cities, I spoke to a wide range of people, including:

- B-Boys/Girls (male and female breakdancers) who own community centres and use Hip Hop in their programmes
- B-Boys and B-girls who work within their local communities
- Representatives of social justice organisations.

I also attended an urban education conference and took part in their workshops to understand the importance of Hip Hop culture in the growth and development of young people.

During my travels, there were some things that stood out for me. Everybody I met was extremely positive and friendly. All were thankful that Hip Hop had changed their lives for the better. Hip Hop has stopped many people from getting involved in drugs and gangs. It is a culture that has an emphasis on self-empowerment, self-expression and positive community spirit. It introduces people to a positive lifestyle and away from activities that lead them into trouble.

Another thing that stood out for me was the abundance of dance-related activities that were available. There are many opportunities

(all year round) for people to take part in classes, workshops and open dance practices, all of which are easily accessible and cost-effective. Every community centre I visited opened up their spaces for dancers to practice for free. Some of the centres only did this once a week, while others did this three times a week. Events and workshops with world-class dancers are often held in these community centres. This is something you rarely hear of in the UK.

Since completing my Travelling Fellowship, I've been utilising the lessons and strategies that were shared with me. I gained a lot of valuable knowledge to enhance my training and boost my teaching skills, drawing on the experience of different practices to use them within my own dance community.

The first goal was to organise a regular open

space for B-Boys and B-Girls to freely practice in order to create more unity among the dancers in my home town. My Travelling Fellowship experience has made me more conscious of the positive benefits of open practices. Regardless of any other practice sessions that are running (which may be more exclusive), there should always be an open practice session, especially when there are young people who may struggle to organise practice space for themselves due to cost or other factors.

Another great benefit of having an open practice is seeing different people, young and old, coming together to dance and share ideas. People who are beginners can practice with more experienced dancers. It creates an extremely positive and welcoming vibe that is needed in a dancing environment. >>

Chaz Bonnar (right) with Crumbs (Style Elements, USA) - Burbank, USA. Photo: Chaz Bonnar © 2014





“People hear and say that racism, discrimination and bullying need to be eradicated. Dance is a solution.”

Above: Crowd at Silverback Open Championships 2014 - Philadelphia, USA. Photo: Kien Quan © 2014  
Right: Poe One (Style Elements, USA), Workshop - Long Beach, USA. Photo: Ervin Arana © 2014



Personally, my training has greatly improved since connecting with local dancers on a regular basis. My training environment is more positive since there's no exclusivity. I've seen vast improvements in my dancing as well as improvements in other individuals. Knowing that other people benefit from my efforts motivates me to continue organising these initiatives. It has also encouraged others to be mindful of the difference between exclusive training sessions and open practice sessions. Having spoken to people at open practices, I know they prefer the latter.

These open practices can be implemented by people of other dance styles too. In fact, it's something that is encouraged by many of the people I spoke with during my

Travelling Fellowship. Especially since positive community spirit exists among other urban dances too. In this example, urban dance mainly correlates to the following styles: Popping, Locking, Hip Hop Freestyle and Krumping. Albeit Popping and Locking are Funkstyles (from West Coast USA), they still have their place within the urban dance community.

Speaking of which, there's constant talk within the urban dance community about securing support from arts organisations. This could be monetary support to set up dance community projects. Otherwise, they could help share the positive benefits of dance with young people and adults, and in doing so, would provide easier access to people who wish to engage with dance. Having

said all that, there are different strategies that arts organisations can adopt that ensure young people are engaging with urban dances on a regular basis. It's important to consider that cost-effective initiatives, which are easily accessible, can ensure constant growth within the dance community. Here are a few strategies that I personally recommend arts organisations adopt:

- Help existing dancers gain access to cheap or free venue space for open practices. One of the biggest issues that surround urban dances is securing regular practice space. This inconsistency is prevalent mainly because hall hire can be expensive - especially for young people. Given the positive nature of these practices, it's unfortunate that such factors are



Above: Chaz Bonnar + Lil' Cesar (Air Force, USA), Hip Hop School of Arts - Pomona, USA. Photo: Chaz Bonnar © 2014  
 Left: Roy (The Ruggeds, Holland), Freestyle Session 2014 - San Diego, USA. Photo: Ervin Arana © 2014

hindering their creative development and opportunities to socialise. Reducing the cost individuals have to pay will see an increase in people participating.

- Offer consistent workshops and classes. Having a consistent programme of dance activities can increase the number of people taking part, whether it is in the form of regular classes or the occasional taster workshop. It must be affordable otherwise participation can decrease. There are dancers in every area who are happy to share their knowledge and teach. Attending dance events can help arts organisations to network with local dancers and dance event organisers, and allow them to meet dancers from other cities and countries, creating more opportunities

for collaboration in the future.

- Involve dancers in fundraisers and other events. This is a great way to gauge interest for any classes or workshops that could potentially be organised. It provides the dancers with great exposure and is a good indicator of the dancers' skill levels. This can also bring more opportunities to local dancers in terms of shows and potential teaching work with other arts organisations. In turn, dancers will be more inclined to collaborate with these arts organisations for personal projects and future events.

Most importantly, to truly understand our needs and feelings towards having these initiatives, representatives of different arts organisations and government bodies should immerse themselves

in the urban dance culture to see for themselves why investing in Breaking, Hip Hop and other urban dances will benefit young people in different communities. It is one of the most powerful and effective ways to bring people together. It shows that people of all ages from different cultures and religions can interact together in a positive manner. People hear and say that racism, discrimination and bullying need to be eradicated. Dance is a solution.

#### Info

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