

Facilitating dance in communities affected by forced migration

Dance artist and scholar **Dr Paula Guzzanti** reflects on her five weeks' residency facilitating dance and wellbeing for Nicaraguan refugees living in Costa Rica. She considers the potential of dance improvisation and mindfulness as part of a humanitarian aid effort

Back in 2018, I felt the need to expand my dance facilitation practice. I was coming towards the end of my practice-as-research PhD and had ten years' experience teaching dance and tai chi to seniors and participants with additional needs in rural areas of County Down, Northern Ireland. The positive changes I observed in the wellbeing of my participants provoked me to consider my embodied knowledge as a kind of social capital – an asset of the community. This idea led me to realise that movement practitioners possess the skills for the transformation and healing of communities.

Around that time, the violence that

erupted in Nicaragua was forcing thousands of people to flee to neighbouring Costa Rica. I pondered: how could a dance for health programme be an integral resource of a humanitarian aid effort? Hungry and frightened bodies may not be able to feel the desire for dancing, I said to myself. It became clear to me that a dance for wellbeing programme required implementing within a wider network of support, including the provision of food, shelter, medical assistance and clothing. It was important to find out whether there was a real need for such a project, thus I began to approach local NGOs (Non-

Governmental Organisations) and grassroot organisations. In the meantime, I submitted an application to the Higginson Leadership Award (1) for seeking the financial support for making my project a reality.

Four organisations replied positively to my letter, recognising the need for delivering psycho-social support for refugees. The members of the Higginson Trust were receptive to my ideas and awarded me £2,500 for carrying out my proposed plan. Although I could not anticipate the impact of my project, I was confident about my capacity to use dance for empowering people. What happens when we inspire another person? Inspiration provokes action. Inspiration is contagious. I thought that creating a chain reaction of inspiring wellbeing was a suitable approach for diving confidently into the uncertainties of my trip to Costa Rica.

During my five weeks working in San José, the capital, and in the border city of Upala, there were multiple challenges. My objective of working daily with the same participants fell apart in my first week. My plan to buy workshop equipment to donate, and work with a single organisation was not practical. Instead, I had to look for new partnerships, and use my funds to pay for transport and food for my participants to get to venues. I



All photos: Paula Guzzanti, Dance & Wellbeing project for Nicaraguans, July 2019. Photos: Carlos Daniel Hernández Bello

had to adapt my plan to the reality I encountered. The ongoing political turmoil in Nicaragua impacted on each refugee's daily life in many direct ways. The majority of them were involved in social activism, and their bodies and health were last in their list of priorities. There were no refugee camps; people lived in different kinds of accommodations spread throughout the country (mostly in the larger cities of San José, Cartago, and in the border region). Most of them struggled to access the basics, and securing a work permit was a major concern, and their future was uncertain and painful. People were anxious to return back to their homes in Nicaragua. Within that context, I needed to create a safe environment for facilitating dance.

Two key strategies were instrumental for the success of the project: first, to deliver dance sessions in the context of a residential program developed by a local NGO with many years of experience, and second, to use the participants' social networks to congregate people. Thanks to the local support networks that I developed once in the country, I was able to reach out to one-hundred Nicaraguans living in vulnerable conditions.

The dance workshops played an important role in making people feel they had a safe place that was

kind and caring towards them. One 60-year-old Nicaraguan woman reflected: "It [the session] took me out of the world of conflict I'm living in, and I passed to another one, a gentler one... a nicer one... Because of the impact of what I lived through... I said this to you... that I needed multiple sessions... to improve a little..."

Another Nicaraguan woman, aged 29 years, expressed: "These techniques that you have taught us through these spaces have helped us a lot. I have dedicated time for myself, I managed to sleep for five hours at night, something I haven't done in more than a year. I feel that my body needed it..." As participants learnt to relax using mindful movement, they started to experience new ways of thinking about their situation. A human rights activist that joined my workshops shared that, despite the difficult times their country was going through, she realised that they deserved to enjoy life and look after themselves.

This project led me to expand my practice as an artist and educator. It was a reaffirmation of the powerful tools we have in dance and somatic practices for supporting communities suffering from the loss and pain caused by violence. Dance can impact upon the affective traces of their painful journey in a holistic and humanistic way. I experienced the

importance of bringing the body to the forefront of social transformation, not only at times of peace but at all stages of violent and political conflict. From contemplating both the courage and the trauma of people looking for refuge, I learnt that while borders separate places of danger from places of safety, the trauma impinging on their bodies comes from the entire journey of forced migration. I learnt from their reflections that dance workshops created a compassionate place for them, free from the stress of their difficult reality.

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References

(1) The Higginson Leadership Award (Queen's University Belfast) supports enterprising activities or ventures overseas which demonstrate initiative and the ability to inspire or act as a role model for others.

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