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Dancing for a cause - Choreographer looks to introduce dance therapy

Published: Sunday | July 5, 2009

Krista Henry, Staff Reporter



Belnavis ... I was never fond of the idea of dancing as just a hobby because it can be so much more. - Contributed

In the movie **Pay It Forward**, youngster Trevor McKinney (Haley Joel Osment) effects change throughout the world by asking that a good deed received be returned by doing something good for others. Jamaican dancer Stefanie Belnavis is asking the same with her dance piece 'Not for Ego, Beyond Self, Not of this World' - which opened this weekend at the Philip Sherlock Centre for the Creative Arts (PSCCA) and is part of the PSCCA 2009 International Arts Festival.

Belnavis' event is in aid of gaining funding to pursue her [master's degree](#) at Antioch University in [New Hampshire](#) (USA) to become Jamaica's first certified dance therapist. Proceeds from the event will also be in aid of 'The Nest', a Salvation Army children's home. Inspired by life and the belief that dance has curative effects, physically and emotionally, Belnavis hopes to 'pay forward' her passion for dancing to others in the hope that dancing can cure many physical and emotional disabilities.

beginning of a masterpiece

Belnavis started dancing at age six after being sent off to dance lessons with her two older sisters, but unlike her siblings, she soon caught the dancing bug. She told **The Sunday Gleaner**, "Dancing is definitely my passion. I was never fond of the idea of dancing as just a hobby because it can be so much more to people's lives whether it's for recreation, educational purposes or exercise."

With the encouragement of family, a young Belnavis trained with some of Jamaica's best including ballet lessons with Elizabeth Vickers-Samuda, the Royal Academy of Dance, the Tony Wilson Company, the Edna Manley School of Dance Junior Class and the University Dance Society. She earned her bachelor's degree in dance at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom. During her undergraduate programme, Belnavis explored the practical and theoretic aspects of dance and the creative elements of choreography and performance as well as the professional aspects of becoming a dance artiste. Belnavis is also a dancer with the National Dance Theatre Company.

More than just performing and teaching dance, which she does part-time at Edna Manley College, Belnavis wants to effect change by starting Jamaica's first recreational and [rehabilitation](#) therapy centre. She said, "Since coming back to Jamaica, I've really realised the need to integrate dance into the social spectrum of Jamaican society ... I've realised I'm very interested in dance [therapy](#) and I would like to have [workshop](#)-based situations and to open my recreational centre with classes in dance, art, music and more."

Waiting to see what this weekend's show will bring for her future, Belnavis is hoping the show's profits can make a dent in the high costs of pursuing the three-year master's programme in dance therapy.

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'Not for Ego, Beyond Self, Not of this World' will feature pieces from Belnavis, as well as dancers Keri Ann Henry, Keita-Marie Chamberlain, Lisa Wilson, Denise Gibbs, Stephanie Thomas, Neila Ebanks and international dance choreographer Sara Longcroft. The piece speaks to Belnavis' need to get money for her programme, hence the 'Beyond Ego', her desire to help others, 'Beyond Self', and the fact that dance is 'Not of this World'.

"I know my dream of the rehabilitation centre is going to be challenging, but I think it's important to try. I think it can be introduced to Jamaica properly but you have to start small - it's really geared towards therapy and to positive thinking and having a healthy lifestyle," she said.

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