

Training in the arts can last a lifetime

My mom and I watched a performance May 21 that took her back to the days when the Brown Theatre was the McCauley, and I performed tap, ballet, jazz and lyrical routines with hundreds of other little girls taking dance lessons at the academy that rented the theater for its year-end recitals.

We attended the ArtsReach Showcase. Hundreds of children ranging in ages from about 3 to 18 and freshly adult took over the Brown Theatre's stage. They performed ballet, hip-hop, tap, West African dance, liturgical dance, drumming, rock and R&B music, classical violin, and spoken word. They had learned their respective disciplines through the ongoing arts programs they attend at community centers and nonprofit organizations throughout the city, programs made possible by ArtsReach, an initiative of The

Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts, and by the artists patient enough to teach children.

At one point in the show, my mom said, "Just think — you got your start on this very stage!" She could recite the choreography of the wee girls performing tap dance numbers at the ArtsReach Showcase: Shuffle, shuffle, ball change. Shuffle, shuffle step.

It didn't click for me until the following day that my mom remembers the choreography. How many

hours of recitals, rehearsals and open studio sessions did she sit through while I was deciding what kind of artist I wanted to be? How bored she must have been at times. How much money she probably blew on a blue tutu with pink-sequin trimming, and then a pink and silver one, and then a red one with black accents and at least a dozen other costumes that would never be used again, save the gold scarf I remember from a single lyrical performance. (The scarf would go on to dress up evening ensembles for a few years.)

And yet my mom remembers the choreography, smiles at the memories and was thrilled to see nearly every seat at the Brown packed with parents and supporters that Saturday. Seeing me pursue the things that made me happy delighted my mom as I was growing up, and it still does. But she knows it's not the same in every family, especially when the child wants to pursue something the family's culture

doesn't value.

The possible conflict came up earlier that day at the Kentucky Women's Book Festival at University of Louisville. Parents of author and keynote speaker Tania James proudly supported her pursuit of a career as a fiction writer. James is of South-Asian descent, and in her culture, especially among her parents' generation, artists generally aren't thought of as cool people who starve for the sake of their passions.

It's worth noting that most of the ArtsReach Showcase participants were black and that they were learning and performing literary and classical arts. There were middle and high school boys dancing hip-hop routines alongside the girls as other boys boldly sang Motown classics and wore wigs mimicking the era's wavy hair among men. Their parents and friends packed the theater house, not the school bleachers at a basketball game, but they cheered just as loudly as they would have at a

sporting event, and I'm sure they're just as proud as they would be of a child who is a traditional athlete.

My performing arts career hasn't expanded too much from where it started, and most of the kids from ArtsReach won't end up with published books or with appearances in Broadway productions. But I hope they will keep arts training with them for the rest of their lives. I still perform occasionally, and obviously, I still write, but I've been enriched culturally since I was a child, and the collaborative nature of the arts, especially the performing arts, has made me a better person.

So parents, I know supporting a child in the arts feels like a tedious hassle sometimes, but delight in it. It's worth it. ♣

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