

Michelle Mathesius: Her Steps to Leading LaGuardia's Dance Department

As told to Ron Sklar

In 2015, AP Assistant Principal of Dance Michelle Mathesius started a scrapbook of articles featuring media profiles of her former students. Needless to say, she's currently on her third volume, and those binders — which sit in her office — are bursting with inspiration and aspiration.

"What makes me happy is when I see kids get into the schools and careers they want," she says. "Secondly, I'm happy when I see alums getting into companies. For example, a young dancer who barely made it through high school is now in the second company of Ailey; another, Matthew Woodcock, is currently dancing in Sokio Teatras Aura, the National Contemporary Company of Lithuania."

In her three decades on the job and the thousands of students she trained, certain people come to mind right away, including Desmond Richardson.

"He was with the first graduating class when I started here," she says. "He has been a principal dancer with Ailey and ABT, played lead in *Chicago* and *Fosse*, and the *New York Times* has called him one of the most versatile dancers of the 21st century. That makes me happy."

Not everybody may score an article in her scrapbook, but she still treasures every student she teaches. She understands that each soul at LaGuardia is a beautiful work in progress.

"Some kids don't blossom until they're in their twenties," she says. "We are nurturing young careers."

Although Michelle has taught here for thirty years, her road to LaGuardia was long and winding. She had been working in New Jersey, earning a solid reputation for setting up performing arts and vocational schools in every county in the state. News of her career victories reached Manhattan; she was offered a job replacing the retiring AP.

“I told them I needed to think about it,” she remembers, “but my answer was already yes.”

Of course, nothing worth having comes easy in life, so Michelle had to dance just a little bit harder to qualify for the job. The college degrees she had already earned would not suffice for New York City teaching requirements, so she had to quickly pursue a second masters degree, in administration. LaGuardia agreed to hold the job for her, which says a lot about the quality she could bring to the school — but talk about pressure!

“It was okay because I wrote a thesis about setting up the vocational schools in New Jersey,” she says. “It was very easy for me to write that.”

Once on the job, she still had to continue to prove herself and work against the myth that someone from New Jersey can’t come into Manhattan and excel at a job this important and demanding. It took a few years, but eventually Michelle earned the respect she deserved.

She continues to help young people hone their skills and advance their careers. The goal here is not performing, but training.

“We’re not a performing department,” she says, “We focus on the graduation dance concert. Our idea is that you don’t perform until you are a senior. The rationale is that we only get four years to train our dancers. We don’t replace training with rehearsals for performances.”

Another benefit of the department: working with guest choreographers. “It’s richer for the kids,” she says, “and the opportunities that come from that are great because we bring in choreographers who have companies. They’ll work with the kids and they often say, ‘I’d like you to join our company when you graduate.’”

What is it about the art of dance that appeals to Michelle?

“I love the passion of it,” she says, “the passion that speaks through the body. Dancers can say so much non-verbally. That is why movement is so important

to me, because it says so much. And I love watching my kids blossom and grow.”