

Inside: How to live a longer and healthier life

Torrance Memorial's Lundquist Tower celebrates 10 years

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COVER PHOTO: MICHAEL NEVEUX

Hundreds of PVUSD schoolkids have learned the basics of krumpin' and breakin' from dance wizard Robert Gilliam.

Zest for Life

Giving Dance a Chance

Hundreds of PVUSD schoolkids have learned the basics of krumpin' and breakin' from Robert Gilliam. His 'Do U Dance' classes also teach important life lessons about teamwork and self-discovery while shattering toxic urban stereotypes.

Written by **Diane Krieger**
Photographed by **Michael Neveux**

As a star wide receiver in high school, Robert Gilliam said “no” to NCAA recruiters, opting instead to study dance at a community college. “The four walls of my bedroom were covered with letters from football scouts,” recalls the Watts native. “My family thought I was crazy.”

Today, schoolchildren across the Southland—including hundreds at four Palos Verdes Unified







Left: Robert Gilliam captivates a group of students at Soleado Elementary School in Rancho Palos Verdes.

Below: Soleado Elementary School student Hannah Sudeth is a proud graduate of one of Gilliam's hip-hop class school programs.



elementary schools—are reaping the rewards of that “crazy” decision. Gilliam, 55, is literally a mover and shaker on the SoCal youth terpsichorean scene.

His Culver City-based academy, On the Edge Dance Studio, together with his nonprofit Artist Collective, has delivered dance experiences to 60 area elementary, middle and high schools. His production company, Gilliam Productions, stages youth arts festivals like the LAUSD spectacle that drew 20,000 attendees in April.

Gilliam has deep personal knowledge of the value of publicly celebrating youth in the arts. Growing up, he excelled at both football and dance.

“If you’re an athlete,” he says, “you get many chances to have your ‘Friday night lights’ experience. But if you’re this kid who likes to dance or paint or make jewelry, you rarely get that platform or even a pat on the back.”

The Early Days

An only child raised by a single mom, Gilliam shared a bedroom with his uncle—a troubled Vietnam vet struggling with alcohol abuse and PTSD. To battle his demons, Uncle Albert danced. Desperately, ecstatically, late into the night. Soon, young Robert was dancing too. Because dance wasn’t cool, he practiced in private, using the garage as his studio.

In public, Gilliam was a jock on the elite football squad of St. Pius X Academy in Downey. College recruiters were watching his senior year. His mom, an LAUSD schoolteacher, was rooting for UCLA. But Gilliam got cold feet after his school’s top quarterback broke an ankle in the season’s first play.

Betting on a future in football suddenly felt risky. “I wanted to have more control over my life, and I knew if I went into the garage and practiced hard, I could make it in dance,” Gilliam shares.

He enrolled at Cerritos College and soon transferred

to Cal Arts on a dance scholarship. Mentored by the late Rebecca Bobele, his career took off. He collaborated with American and international dance companies as an artist, teacher and choreographer. He lived in China for four years, becoming the first American to set a jazz-hip-hop piece for the Shanghai Opera House.

South Bay Dance

After he opened his Culver City dance studio in 2005, public schools started inquiring about on-site programming. His first Palos Verdes classes were at Lunada Bay Elementary. He’s since added Cornerstone, Soleado and Dapplegray.

Sessions typically run 12 weeks and are designed for 25 students, mostly second and fifth graders. No prior skill, aptitude or interest in dance is assumed. Gilliam’s ‘Do U Dance’ method lets them choose when and how they want to engage.

“If a child isn’t feeling so excited about getting up and dancing in front of everyone, that’s OK,” he says.

Lessons cover a mix of hip-hop, krump, breakin’, jazz and contemporary styles, but there are many other creative opportunities, starting with a communal mural. “Or maybe they like music. Girls sometimes like to do hair. I try to find that entry point for each child so they get to create,” he says.

Gilliam divides the kids into teams. Each designs its costumes, chooses music and stages a short piece for the closing showcase. Everyone comes together in the finale choreographed by Gilliam.

“And it’s not very often,” he says proudly, “that I’ve had a child who *doesn’t* end up dancing in the program.”

Broadening His Reach

Gilliam has taken his 'Do U Dance' philosophy all over Los Angeles, including inside juvenile detention centers and behavioral clinics. Assisting him are the 45 krumpers, hip-hop dancers, and other South Los Angeles-based performing and visual artists who make up his nonprofit Artist Collective.

“Taking these very diverse artists into affluent areas like Palos Verdes is a great conversation starter,” he says.

At the height of the 2020 George Floyd protests, *Medium* published an article on Gilliam’s social justice vision. “Through dancing together, students and teaching artists unlearn the harmful fallacies and stereotypes that ... strip away our collective humanity,” he told the online magazine.

Lately his focus has turned to integrating kids with special needs. These youngsters occasionally attend Gilliam’s school-based sessions. Accompanied by one-on-one aides, they tend to stay “on the perimeter,” he says. “It’s really important to me to work on that more and include everyone.”

He has begun to make inroads. In June, Gilliam Productions organized an arts festival at a Northridge vocational school for young adults with disabilities, and he’s now lobbying LAUSD leaders to greenlight a “capable arts festival” showcasing creativity among the special ed population. He’s in the planning phase for the 2025 LAUSD Arts Fest and aims to surpass last year’s spectacle, which spotlighted student creativity on six stages and featured a “half-time show” of 500 performers. Next year he’ll add a stage for artists with disabilities.

Gilliam hopes to launch a similar youth arts festival for South Bay schools, being sure to include less-affluent cities like Lomita and Carson, and to fully embrace special-needs students. But at the end of the day, Gilliam says, nothing brings him greater joy than teaching.

“When you get a kid who initially says, ‘I hate dance,’ and then by the 12th day they’re spinning on the ground, jumping in the air—those are the best days of my life. It feels like I’ve set them free.” •

Robert Gilliam is a passionate force in bringing the world of dance to students in the South Bay and Greater Los Angeles.



“Through dancing together, students and teaching artists unlearn the harmful fallacies and stereotypes that ... strip away our collective humanity.” — ROBERT GILLIAM