

# SETTING NEW INDUSTRY STANDARDS FOR INCLUSIVITY IN DANCE

by Victoria Jones

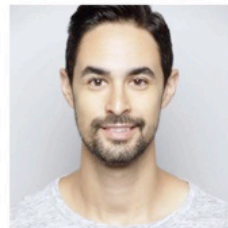
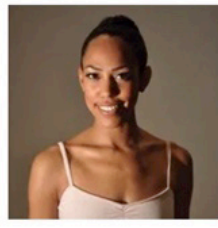
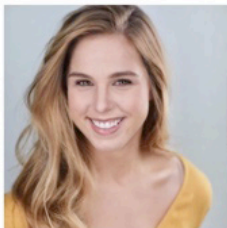
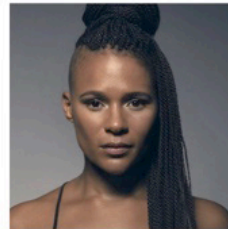
Since Kenny Borchard and Mauro Villanueva became the Directors of Joffrey Texas in 2016, they were determined to create more accessibility in the dance industry. Located in San Antonio, Texas, the intensive-based entity teaches Ballet, Modern, Contemporary, and other techniques to groups typically made up of middle-to-upper class white and Latina students.

"We had been leading Joffrey Texas as the previous directors had been, which was just kind of the status quo, you know?" said Mauro. "We knew that we had to step outside the norm and go in a different direction."

During this year's seasonal intensive training sessions, Kenny and Mauro have implemented changes to their program to make sure it is more accessible and inclusive for dance students who may feel marginalized due to their race, gender, financial class, and learning preferences. Kenny and Mauro's experience on this path may be beneficial to dance studios and teachers who can relate to this urge to increase diversity in the dance community.

By offering a sliding scale payment option, Kenny and Mauro eliminated the barrier of affordability for lower-income students. To seamlessly integrate this payment option into their registration structure, Kenny

and Mauro use Core to Coeur, a streaming platform for live fitness and wellness video classes. As dancers register for classes with Joffrey Texas using the platform, they are offered to use the app's sliding scale payment option, which allows them to pay as much as they are willing and able to. In fact, dancers can even pay as little as zero dollars.



Faculty of the Joffrey Texas Spring Intensive: clockwise, from top left: Yumelia Garcia, Kenny Borchard, Destini Rogers, Melissa Jackson, Erica Lynette Edwards, Nina Hudson, Mauro Villanueva, Lindsey Donnell, Mindy Moeller, Christina Johnson, James Alonzo (center)

"I know the sliding scale blessed many people, including me," said Addison Mouser, a 16-year-old Brown Girls Do Ballet Ambassador who attended the Spring Intensive and whose family has faced consistent financial strain.

Oftentimes, there is a stigma at-

tached to students who require financial assistance, so main-

taining a level of privacy is important to dancers using the sliding scale payment method. To avoid any potential discrimination, Kenny and Mauro suggest ensuring that the studio's faculty and other students have no knowledge of how much each student pays.

Although many lower-income students benefit from this affordability, there's a reward for higher-income students, as well. "We've had several students pay extra for classes because they know that this is a chance to help somebody else," said Mauro. "We like to share that the sliding scale is a collaborative effort, those

who can will pay more and those who can't don't. We like the sense of community it gives our classes."

While increased affordability was a major factor in creating more accessibility to dancers, attracting a new demographic of dancers was another. Fortunately, virtual learning helped with this in more ways than one.

"There are so many factors that come into play when you're around other people that are eliminated when you are in your home, which is a safer and more comfortable space," said Kenny. "Even though there isn't as much space to move, there's more freedom to move emotionally and as a person."

"One student expressed to me that they appreciated this platform because it allowed them to enter into a classroom that they normally would not have had the courage to walk into," said professional ballet teacher Christina Johnson. "They could be in their own world and kind of explore the class the way they wanted to, still getting corrections, still watching others, but being more private."

Christina Johnson, who is Black and German, was one of the guest instructors for the Joffrey Texas Spring Intensive. Out of 11 faculty members, seven of them were Black. Kenny and Mauro hoped that hiring a diverse faculty for their intensive training sessions would help dancers of all races feel encouraged and comfortable enough to participate. The convenience of virtual learning eliminated every excuse that would've previously made this goal difficult. "With this, we can have somebody from Milwaukee, New York, and California all in a row," said Mauro.

Due to these benefits, Kenny and Mauro plan to continue offering virtual lessons when in-person lessons return. "You're not having to really go out of your way to create more opportunity for students to learn," said Kenny. Even when teachers are hired virtually, there can still be a way to ensure the teachers are qualified and of the same caliber of any other guest that would normally be invited. "There's a process that we go through to speak with them and make sure their teaching style is in line with our teaching style," said Kenny.

When Kenny and Mauro initially began their mission of increasing accessibility, they worked closely with Cultivating Better Tomorrows, a diversity and inclusion consulting firm founded by Erica Lynette Edwards, to understand the needs of marginalized communities. After participating in several of the organization's anti-racism trainings, Kenny and Mauro joined the Cul-

tivating Better Tomorrows team as founders, putting the lessons they learned into practice at Joffrey Texas.

In order to actively cater to new demographics, Kenny and Mauro partnered with Brown Girls Do Ballet, a non-profit organization founded in 2013 that focuses on promoting diversity in the dance industry, to help draw more dancers of color to their Spring Intensive. The partnership proved to be successful. When the Spring Intensive was held virtually in early March, about 98% of the attendees were Black. "They communicated 100% what we'd been feeling as an organization and did the work to create a program that made everyone feel included," said TaKiyah Wallace, founder of Brown Girls Do Ballet.

"Collaboration is what has allowed for all of these things to happen, said Kenny. "We are figuring out what we need and then looking at who does it best, and then collaborating with them instead of trying to invent the wheel every time for each thing."

As Kenny and Mauro continue to adjust their strategies to make room for new dancers, they hope other organizations will be inspired to make similar changes in their own studios.



Morticia Addams  
photographed by Lory Lyon