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## Turning a passion for break dancing into a career

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Bust a move: Mark Wong (aka Metal) is a local break dancer who has joined forces with others in the dance world to form 'Hip Hop Fundamentals', which teaches and encourages other young people about the craft. (photo by Glenn Tucker)

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As a youngster growing up in Bermuda, Mark 'Metal' Wong can clearly remember the year his family got the MTV Channel at their house, when he got his first real taste of hip hop music.

It was 1998 or '99 — and one particular music video 'Rapper's Delight' — inspired him to attempt break dancing — or as he described it "kicking around on the floor".

The former Saltus student confessed he was "terrible" at first, but since then he has gone on to

teach scores of young people, many from the inner city areas in Philadelphia, about the craft.

Mr Wong has joined forces with fellow breakdancer, Steve 'Believe' Lunger, and educator, Aaron 'Peabody' Troisi, to form a group called Hip Hop Fundamentals.



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Their latest break dancing show aims to teach students the link between hip hop and the civil rights movement and give young people non-violent ways they can make positive change in their communities.

They largely tour around the US East Coast, and have also hosted fundraising efforts so they can offer free shows to schools and community sites in Philadelphia.

Mr Wong was home for a visit last week and spoke to *The Royal Gazette* about how he turned his passion for break dancing into a meaningful career.

He believes break dancing has given scores of young people from some of the "rough" inner city areas of Philadelphia a brighter path to a better life.

"Some of the kids we dance with are from neighbourhoods I wouldn't feel safe going down after dark," he said. "I can't say I have directly seen it take them away from drugs and gang violence, but I can say it's given them a purpose.

"You can just see that they almost had the ability to put blinders up and just focus on what they want to do and even though they live in a neighbourhood that's not the greatest they just decided 'I'm going to do what I want to do'.

"Some of our greatest success stories are kids we have seen since age 14, who go on to graduate from high school and go on to college and say they want to become teachers."

He said he felt proud about the work the group has done, but admittedly doesn't want to take too much credit.

"I think hip hop is a powerful agent on its own," he said. "So I never really try and claim any of the young people like 'I was the one that taught you'. I feel that they taught themselves and it pointed them in the right direction."

Mr Wong said hip hop and break dancing means 'everything' to him because it has given him, and many others, the power to just be true to themselves.

"I have seen young kids grow up in the Phili hip-hop scene and I have seen them go from struggling to try and 'be cool' and this tough kid, hanging out with the wrong crowd and gang members, and all of a sudden this weight is lifted off their shoulders and they realise they don't have to do that.

"You can be something different and what you want to be," he explained.

"You can be that dorky kid that likes comic books and cartoons, you can be the kid who wants to be in a notebook and draw all the time or listen to music all the time.

"And I think once you find that scene where everybody has this common link of liking hip hop, but everyone within that is so different, it just gives everyone this space to breath easy and be themselves, it's incredibly diverse."

He has had the opportunity to meet people from all over the world and has also been also to showcase his skills in places like Canada, Switzerland and Finland.

The local dancer will also be bringing his talents to the Island later this year, when Hip Hop Fundamentals is scheduled to take part in a TEDx event in October.

He said his upbringing in Bermuda had a great impact on him. It was during those early years that his favourite thing to do was watch the Gombeyes at local events. "I always wanted to be like them and jump around and do athletic stuff," he said.

That passion only grew once he left the Island, to go to a US boarding school at age 16.

He took to the internet and tried to find books on break dancing. He would also watch music videos in slow-motion, so he could learn the moves.

"But it wasn't really until I got to Philadelphia when I saw my first b-boys and b-girls I had ever seen in person, that I decided 'These are the people I need to hang out with and they are going to be the ones to teach me how to do this'," he said.

To this day, he's not quite sure why he was so determined to learn to break dance. All he knows is that no matter what was stressing him out or bothering him, dancing always provided him with a release.

"It started as a hobby and then was something I couldn't deny I just had to do it," he said.

He remembers frequenting small clubs in the area to practise his moves, but said it wasn't the easiest community to break into as an outsider.

"For me at first it was really intimidating. [Some of the other dancers] looked like they were real tough and you only went and danced in the middle of the circle if you were good.

"But then once I started getting to know them, everybody was really friendly and really open and pretty willing to help you with your moves and teach you stuff.



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“Once you kind of pay your dues in any dance or b-boying scene in the US, if you are there for long enough and people can see that you are working hard and getting better and starting to win competitions, they show you a lot of respect and you become friends with pretty much everybody.”

It was that same work ethic that landed him the nickname ‘Metal’.

In the four or five years it took him to really master break dancing, Mr Wong was known for his hard landings and ended up scratching every part of the body imaginable.

“I couldn’t land a move to save my life and they were like ‘Yo man aren’t you hurting yourself?’,” the dancer explained.

“I said I am all right and they said ‘You must be made of metal or something man’ — and it just stuck, that’s what they called me. I also say it stands for ‘Make Every Thing About Love’ that’s what I changed it to.”

These days the 31-year-old is considered “an old head” — meaning he is one of the older, respected members of the group.

When he watches young teenagers coming up now in the break-dancing scene, he is astounded by the kinds of moves and tricks they can tackle.

He watches young dancers flying in the air and said they are capable of things he “would have never even conceived of”.

His ultimate goal is to make Hip Hop Fundamentals an “equitable and sustainable” organisation and to train young dancers to take over and form small dance crews around the US.

“The other goal is to get the school districts and Governments to recognise, not just the power of hip hop, but the power of young people creating something for themselves,” he said.

For more information on the Hip Hop Fundamentals, visit the group’s Facebook page.

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