

ParentMap 2018 Superhero Melba Ayco: The Dancer

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PARENTING/MINDFULNESS

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A Q&A with the owner and artistic director of Northwest Tap Connection

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Melba Ayco is a storyteller.

“I put stuff in a suitcase [in my head], and when kids talk to me, I can take it out and remember exactly what it was like, so I can help them navigate the same challenges.” she says



challenges, she says.

In that suitcase: the terror of being a 9-year-old black girl riding a school bus to a newly integrated school as white protesters bombarded the bus with bricks.



Melba Ayco (left). Photo credit: Will Austin

Also in there: the humbleness of realizing what you don't know. While Ayco was growing up in Louisiana, her only exposure to the various cultures of Asia was on TV. She still remembers — with gratitude — the patience of her first coworker of Asian descent, Mr. Ma. He took the time to dispel her misconceptions. “He raised my awareness of racial diversity,” says Ayco, who made a point to learn from and listen to Mr. Ma throughout their time together.

Ayco uses stories like these to inform her work as artistic director of [Northwest Tap Connection \(NWTC\)](#). NWTC, which Ayco owns, bills itself as a race- and social-justice-focused dance studio for underserved communities in Rainier Beach. By drawing on her personal experience, Ayco hopes to empower and educate the children who study at NWTC. Between her work at NWTC and more than 30 years at the Seattle Police Department, she knows how powerful such conversations can be.

“Your babies are listening to adult conversation,” she says.

“[They're] establishing how they think based on what you say.”

With this in mind, NWTC imbues dance lessons with broader messages about self-esteem, respect and dissent — lessons that take on new life in the studio's performances. Two years ago, for

example, NWTC instructor Shakiah Danielson choreographed a number in response to police violence against African-Americans set to Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout." [The piece](#), performed by NWTC students, won the Audience Award at the National Film Festival for Talented Youth, the world's largest youth film festival.

"It's a conversation about how police fit into our community," says Ayco of the performance. Her three decades at SPD (she retired as a supervisor for the Records Division in 2017) taught her just how vital such conversations are to our community.

"My work is to help children define themselves as socially conscious young people, with a vision of building tomorrow," Ayco says. "We don't want to raise another generation on senseless acts of violence."

Q Who inspires you?

My greatest inspiration is my mother and the sisterhood of her family. She wasn't my favorite growing up, but I realize now how wise she was.

Q What's the most misunderstood part of your job?

People see my job as an artistic director, but I see my job at Northwest Tap as the guardian of a mission.

Guardians are nurturers and protectors. People are confused

when the protector comes out, when I have to defend the mission.

Q What's one small action our readers can take in their own lives to make positive change happen?

They're not my words, but "Be the change you want to see." Start with yourself and ask, "What can I do?" Then go for it.

Q Best advice for kids with big ambition?

Hard work beats talent every time.

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