

# ParentMap 2020 Superhero Donald Byrd: The Citizen Artist

*By Gemma Alexander*

Dancer, choreographer and teacher Donald Byrd is also frequently referred to as a “citizen artist” because of the social awareness that shines through every aspect of his career. Byrd’s conviction that dance is both an art form and a civic instrument is most visible in his choreography and in the programming he creates as artistic director for [Spectrum Dance Theater](#). But his most lasting impact may be less immediately visible, in the programs offered by Spectrum’s dance school, where “Dance for All” is more than just a catchphrase.

Offering classes and training for beginners and professionals alike, from toddlers to seniors (“The oldest in that class is 90-plus,” Byrd says with pride), Spectrum has a focus that differs from those of many dance schools. Instead of trying to sculpt a “dancer’s body” based on a particular aesthetic, says Byrd, “The ideal body for dancing is one that moves well.” And that is something Byrd can teach to any willing student.

“Who said being skinny was a prerequisite to dance?” he asks. “I have seen a lot of skinny people on stage who can’t move. The best movers often are not the people with those kinds of bodies.”

Byrd says that at Spectrum, a student who is in financial need — no matter what their body type and even if they have absolutely no talent — can earn a scholarship. “One of the reasons Spectrum was attractive to me was that the school program was based purely on the desire to dance.”

Through the school, Byrd is working to make the dance world more accessible and equitable; through his choreography, he addresses global social issues. But the two approaches are not kept separate. A series of Byrd Technique classes introduces students to his particular approach to dance. World dance classes teach students dance techniques from cultures outside of the Eurocentric ballet tradition. Byrd personally teaches a class he calls “Engaging.” In that class, he assigns readings with social justice themes, teaches about the work of marginalized artists, and guides students through self-examination and identity exercises.

“I want them to not just be able to dance. I want them to be able to talk about dance in a couple of contexts. One of them is to talk about dance in an aesthetic context, and another is to think about dance in a civic, social context. I encourage them to think in the context of responsibility — what is their responsibility, not only to themselves and their families, but to the world at large? There’s a sense of compassionate empathy. That’s what I want for them,” he says.

The result is a supportive community culture in which students grow as dancers and as people.

“[Students] show up day after day. They like the training, the atmosphere, and the

people here are friends. They're in it together," says Byrd. But the kids aren't the only ones who benefit from the lessons.

"A remarkable thing happened when I started teaching kids," says Byrd. "All the people in my life, they said, 'Oh, you seem much nicer now!'"