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Junior Bernadin

"We want the kids to feel like, you know what, what you all have here is stuff you have earned."

Vicki Davis

The Ten-minute Teacher podcast with Vicki Davis. Every week day you'll learn powerful practical ways to be a more remarkable teacher today.

VICKI: It's a wonderful Wednesday and we have one of the most wonderful people I know, Junior Bernadin, @JBernadin who's dean of students at Ron Clark Academy @ronclarkacademy. I know Junior because we have collaborated together this year for the second time on the MAD About Mattering Project <http://madaboutmattering2017.wikispaces.com/>. But today we're talking about Junior's Step team that he works with. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zK15BqXwwZA> So Junior, what is Step and how on earth did you bring it to your school?

JUNIOR: Step is an art form that was actually originated from the gold mines of South Africa. There's something called the African Gumboot dance <http://www.southafrica.net/za/en/articles/entry/article-southafrica.net-gumboot-dancing> where the coal miners and the gold miners used to go – and they were restricted from speaking. So it was actually a form of protest where they would use these rubber boots that they would go and they would tap on them and make rhythmic patterns and beats and rhythms beating on their chest, clapping their hands and clapping the boots. And it was a form of communication for them.

The African Gumboot was actually used as well to protect their foot from disease and so forth when the mine would become flooded. So it kind of served a dual purpose. But really what they did is allow the miners to communicate with one another when they weren't allowed to really speak to each other.

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But they would communicate through the forms of the rhythm, almost kind of like a Morse code. And then from there it kind of grown, it's a tradition of South Africa and what continued to happen is more people began to do it, this became part of a cultural showcase. Actually, some of the organizers or some of the

managers of the mines actually used to have competition between miners with the African Gumboot dance as well. So it's kind of something that kind of grew.

And I think it might have been the mid-1970s-ish the African-American fraternity sororities who are dedicated to serving communities and so forth during civil rights movements and making changes for African-Americans around the world began to incorporate that into some of their fraternity traditions. And over the years this kind of allowed these groups to kind of create a new art form in the midst of struggle, very similar to what happened in South Africa. It kind of grew to what we know as stepping today.

When I joined RCA in 2009, actually Susan Barnes <http://www.ronclarkacademy.com/meet-the-team> had been working on a project where the kids were getting ready to visit Africa. And she's like, wow, how cool would it be if the kids had the opportunity to learn the African Gumboot dance or learn a form of stepping which is derived from the African Gumboot dance. So the students had the opportunity to go to the University of Georgia and they met a couple of members from several fraternities and sororities also known as the Divine Nine, <http://www.blackgreek.com/divinenine/> which is nine organizations. The kids had the opportunity to go and learn and learn some steps from these individuals and bring it back.

And once I actually started at RCA, what I found was – I was like, “Oh, this is something really cool” and I kind of saw what Susan had envisioned and the kids were getting ready to take a trip to South Africa. So we were like, “Wow, we know they're going to share the African Gumboot dance when we get there.” How cool would it actually be for us to share what the African Gumboot dance has turned into here in America?

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VICKI DAVIS @COOLCATTEACHER

And it was like a very awesome experience for our kids. The South Africans were actually mesmerized as well to kind of see the art form that they created kind of transitioning and turning into something new. And they really enjoyed it as well. It is a lot of great cultural exchange between our student and theirs. It was a great opportunity of creating connections and allowed our students to continue to grow and bond with these students as well being global citizens.

VICKI: And I know, when I was in Georgia Tech, that's where I first saw stepping. And it's just so unique and different but also very inspiring, the passion in it is just tremendous. And I'll link in the show notes some examples so that those who are listening, if they haven't had the privilege, you can see it. But now you're competing in step competitions. So how does that work?

JUNIOR: So years ago we had a couple of students who we took them to a step show and they saw the competition and they were like, “wow, we think we should compete, we should compete.” And at time we were just an exhibition team, which means

we performed at school events and maybe our school musical and maybe somewhere in the community but we weren't actually competing in the art form of stepping.

Years ago we found a league called The National Step League <http://www.nationalstepleague.org/> as well as another league called The Georgia Steppers League <http://georgiasteppersleague.com/> which is part of the National Stepping Association <http://www.nsastep.org/> . There's a whole competitive spirit to this particular art form where you can go in, you can be judged on a variety of things, your level of precision, arm angles, formation, vocal clarity, showmanship, creativity, levels of difficulty and so forth. And we thought it would be a cool opportunity for the kids to get involved. And we promised the kids when we took them to a show that we would do that. You know, if you promise something to a kid you actually have to do it.

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So before they graduated, we found a show that we can actually have them participate in and it was Jacksonville Florida, and we drove down to Jacksonville Florida and it was the kid's first experience competing as a step team. And I just remember the moment right before the kids hit the stage and the nervousness that they had going on. They were nervous, they were scared, that's their first time competing. But they were also kind of anxious at the same time. We had been working hard, we had been burning the late night oil and we decide to put together a show, an experience for the audience and we ended up breaking the league's record with having the highest score ever in the competition.

VICKI: You're kidding. Your first time?

JUNIOR: Our first time. Yeah, we've been competing for – this is our fourth year and we've been the three-time national reigning step team champions for the National Steppers League.

VICKI: Wow. And that happens so fast. So what do you think kids learn from this?

JUNIOR: Well, I think first of all they learn teamwork. And part of our whole mantra for the step team is scholarship and service. So when Ms. Barnes and I and also Dr. Jones who teaches math at the school – when we're working with the team, we want them to be well rounded individuals, we want them to carry the spirit of service, we want them to carry the spirit of scholarship as well. So kids know their grading expectations that we have for them as well like making sure they the grade, they're in good standings. They know that we're going to be serving the community so they're expect to be at all the community service events.

But most importantly they learn that they have to work as a team, that they're only as valuable as their weakest link. So we're constantly encouraging to help one another, to tutor one another, whether it's in the classroom or outside the classroom and just to bond with one another because, again, when you're on a

team with a group of individuals and so forth it makes a huge difference when you're actually connected with one another. And we want to teach the kids what it means to put in hard work because many times kids are involved in activities where maybe they recognition for being great or for being average or so forth.

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And we want the kids to feel like, you know what, what you all have here I stuff you've earned. So for steps, the kids choreograph the steps. The kids come up with the themes and ideas for the theme that we're going to have for the show. We make the kids come up with these things so they have a sense of ownership to what it is that they're creating and what it is that we're trying to create as a school as well and so that they also understand the process.

Most recently, one of our alumni happened to be on spring break and he was one of the members of our former step team, actually the first national championship team and he choreographed certain steps for the kid's shows. So it's interesting to watch the kids even come back now remembering things that we've incorporated as being part of our team, remembering the things that they've done, you know, just having certain memories and bringing them back and how those memories have helped impacted them. And they've gone on to start step teams at their schools as well.

VICKI: There's so much that we could talk about but we're out of our time. I just hope that you'll go, look in the show notes. I can't say enough of my friend, Junior, because he's the real deal. When we set up this interview I didn't even realize that they were the national winners. I'm even more impressed now than I was before.

Teachers, this is just another example of a remarkable teacher who really gets out of his comfort zone and jumps right in there to help make a remarkable experience for students.

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