

DZIAH, the hip hop dance crew based in South Auckland, hit the international spotlight in July this year by coming second in the World Hip Hop Championships in Los Angeles. They have accomplished a great deal since their beginnings three years ago.

I saw them perform as part of their Desire to Dream showcase held at Telstra Stadium, Manukau recently. I found myself part of a very enthusiastic, supportive audience, vocal and at times on their dancing feet, competing for the prizes and all adding to the show's inclusive atmosphere.

A few days later in the industrial cul de sac of Lovegrove Crescent in Otara, I met up with the quietly spoken Billy Paea who has a passion and vision for dance far greater than his small stature. Director of DZIAH, choreographer, dancer; musician and personal trainer, he greeted me warmly as I shared my enthusiasm of the showcase.

How did the name DZIAH and the spelling of it come about?

Pretty much the desire to dance is the main aim and a passion for dance is why we named the group. Yeah, to make it more street, more urban, because that is the hip hop culture and our background in dancing.

You have eight different cultures all represented within the twelve members of DZIAH, how does this effect/influence your working practices?

We are brought up in the same area and were friends before we formed the dance group.

Everyone has different inspirations – we are 12 awesome choreographers. The boys have backgrounds in break dance, jazz, contemporary and hip hop. In practices we work off each other; we are getting better as a team and developing those different influences. What makes us DZIAH, is having all these cultures.

Tell me about the choreographic process for the dance you took to the Hip Hop World Championships in LA in July this year.

For the routine we wanted people to have fun; to make it a show with different contrasts, not just a plain dance. We went through different ideas - a move or sequence that we thought would fit - it could be *Kapa Haka*. We like to include strong movements that are different to

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the graceful movements. It could be fast or slow tempo or incorporating different styles, poppin or lockin or a flip - plus the humour aspect. Everyone added his bit into the routine. You can get real good choreography but it is visually boring. We like to work on different shapes and levels within these -- you want movement dropping down and up to the highest level. You cannot put much into two minutes - it was real hard - you have to make your mark.

Does music or movement come first?

I do the music and it definitely comes first; it works better this way. You can match certain sounds with shapes and different movements. It is important to have a good flow from beginning to end. Actually we do not do the whole mix straight away - just piece by piece until we link it all in - transitions are harder than choreography. It is a long process.

What was particularly original (that something special), about your group performance?

Just the energy on stage. NZ supporters at the actual event had never seen us perform like that before. Here there is nobody to really push or challenge us, so I think it was the international competition that raised our level.

What did the judges say/notice?

They liked the originality, lots of different styles and movements, the way the routine was put together and the flow.

How is your success affecting the group?

We are moving into fulltime. We have a lot more recognition even though we have been going for three years doing the same thing. This takes us to the next step.... professional dancers doing it for a living. We know we can do better than that routine...we just need time. Raising the money to get there was the hardest, \$49,000, it was a big obstacle.

We want to develop a course that educates kids so that they can make dance a career and do it for a living in NZ. It is not just dancing that is going to get you there; nobody can make a living just being a choreographer. We are developing NZQA credits for sequencing your own music, marketing, administration, the technical side, business - invoicing, health and fitness. Probably will take another year. For the work we are doing, especially with youth, I won a World of Difference Vodafone scholarship, so they pay for my whole wage next year:

What are some of the aims for your work with youth?

The Desire to Dream Programme is aimed at kids that would never get a chance to pay for classes at a dance studio. There are a lot of dancers, especially in our community, that are naturally talented but cannot afford dance classes or even feel comfortable going to other dance companies where they teach hip hop. It is about building relationships, self-esteem and confidence. We find a lot of kids are shy at first, so it gets them out of their box. They relate to other kids in a good environment, its gives them a chance and inspiration to continue dancing.

There is a perception of dance and what it is like, especially our form of dance. A lot of people have a negative attitude against hip hop because of the culture. We do other forms of dance but are considered as a hip hop dancers. However we try to not label ourselves so much as a hip hop group, but as a performing group. When people see us performing, their reaction often is "Man I did not think that was hip hop!" It is different from what they perceived.

The elite team is just the face of what we are about. Kids, they look up to us and we are becoming role models for them. They want to be like DZIAH. In giving back to the youth, encouraging them saying "you guys can do it too, we came from nothing and have not been dancing as a group for that long".

What did this Desire to Dream Programme consist of?

The trial programme of eight weeks has just finished. The students had two hours of dance – exposing them to different dance styles twice a week – culminating in a performance: showcasing what they have done. We included other performing groups, both local and out of town, that would inspire them.

I noticed you have three age groups in the programme.

Yeah, Junior 7-14, Varsity 14-18 and Adults 18 plus. For the trial we went to all the dance competitions Auckland-wide, scouting, and if we saw somebody with potential, we invited them to audition. We had about 200 come to the audition. Classes were held here in our studio with only 20 per group selected and all of them were real good.

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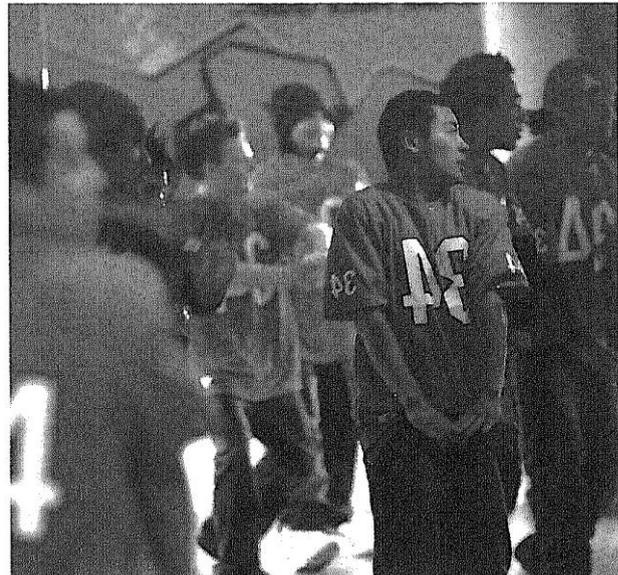
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INTERVIEW

How did you tap into raw talent?

With the raw talent we invited people that had no experience, however we saw some potential during our scouting. These people may not be able to pick up the choreography quickly but once they perform, they have the performance face on. That's what we are looking for.

What happens after the eight weeks when you have given them a real injection of dance?

The reason we want to go to different towns and run the Desire to Dream Programme is to give a chance for different students to show their talents. We have connections within other dance companies in NZ. Showcasing the talent and promoting connections for these students with the right people in those dance companies, fosters further development and training for youth.

Next year we plan to have a bigger show with more crews. We want to try and develop the relationship between other groups and us by having this yearly. It is good to have everyone working together with a passion for dance in NZ. None of the students wanted it to end; they had such a good taste of it. It is up to them if they want to continue - they have had a taste of it. If you are passionate about something you are not going to let anything stop you.

We have asked some of them to come on to our development crews. These are performance groups under DZIAH. We, the elite team, train and choreograph for these boys and girls groups: the Wymondley Boys, The Ninjas and Dcypher. They will be stepping up and working very hard next year to do some of the performance work we (the Elite team) currently do because we will be doing more corporate work.

What are your plans for the immediate future?

We are going to be real busy the next two months planning, teaching and performing every week before our second new studio gym opens in January. We continue to choreograph, trying to blend in new flavours and moving with the times creating something different.