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stepping up

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A MAN WITH A PASSION FOR STEPPING MAKES LINKS TO AFRICA, LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Commerce and choreography both require a shrewd eye for unlikely combinations. Brian Williams, co-founder and director of Step Afrika! USA, united his passion for stepping with a businessman's ability to package an upstart trend. Step Afrika! has entertained and educated audiences around the world under Williams guidance as educator, performer and entrepreneur. Williams aims to continue to inform audiences about the history and values behind the step tradition by reaching out to a broader population, and expanding the seven-year-old company's commitment to mentoring and education. "I see Step Afrika! going on to develop a company that can promote and present this art form, well beyond my performing years.

"WE WANT TO MAKE SURE WE STAY CONNECTED, TO SMALL COMMUNITIES, RURAL COMMUNITIES,"

With big ideas but little time or money, Williams struggles to piece together the capital and business plan necessary for Step Afrika!'s growth. Step Afrika! came out of Williams' experience with traditional dance in South Africa. He graduated from Howard University with a B.A. in marketing. After graduation, he received a fellowship that took him to Maseru, Lesotho, a town on the eastern border of South Africa. There, Williams observed similarities between South African dances and the stepping he had learned in Alpha Phi Alpha, his college fraternity.

A percussive dance form based on rhythmic footwork, stepping resembles the gumboots dancing Williams saw in Lesotho. He returned to South Africa in 1991 and began collaborating with the Soweto Dance Theater. Three years later, their joint effort produced the Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival. Step Afrika! now includes ventures in the US, UK and South Africa. Highlighting that cultural connection remains an integral part of Step Afrika!'s performance. "We like to share the culture that created the art form," said Williams from his Washington, D.C. home where he was enjoying a brief respite between performances.

At the first national conference on stepping, held earlier this year, researchers presented evidence that traced stepping back as far as 1906. "Stepping is starting to be viewed as an art," Williams pointed out, "It's traditional, it's folkloric, and it's just as legitimate in form and function as ballet." Williams would like Step Afrika! to lead the research and documentation of stepping's historical roots. The troupe just finished a 50-city, Maine to Mississippi tour, putting their performance to use as an informal mentoring opportunity between performers and student audiences. "We want to make sure we stay connected to small communities, rural communities," Williams explained.

Williams has made taking the show further afield a priority. In addition to small-town performances, Williams hopes to bring Step Afrika!'s annual festival, which has been held in both Soweto and London, to the U.S. Williams believes it is important to give stepping the widest possible exposure. "African-Americans need to show a new face," Williams said, "T.V. doesn't really represent us as fully as it should. Gangsta rap and hip-hop pretty much dominate the scene for African-Americans."

Step Afrika!'s 10 to 12 regular dancers perform part-time. Most pursue careers outside of dance, like law, medicine or finance. They represent a wide range of possible role models for the troupe's younger audiences. The participation-oriented show opens a dialogue between children and the performers. "We could step," Williams enthused. "Then, because the kids thought we were cool, we could talk to them about the importance of education."

Williams pointed to five elements of stepping that make it a useful educational tool. Stepping offers an opportunity for group work and group identification while allowing for individual flare. Girls and boys participate equally. Stepping provides a high-impact workout. Children encounter college students and professionals who act as mentors. Most importantly, stepping is linked to academic and collegiate success. Since stepping is largely a part of the fraternity and sorority system, children who want to participate will have to gain admission to college. As other groups replicate the success of Step Afrika!, Williams hopes that the African-American community keeps hold of the tradition.

"There are issues of cultural ownership here," he insisted, "Historically, as African-Americans, we tend to lose control of our art forms." Williams named blues, jazz and tap as examples. "As more and more people get involved, it changes it," Williams continued, "That's not a bad thing, but we should be more proactive with stepping as a form of cultural capital."

Keeping Step Afrika! at the forefront of this developing tradition has become Williams' priority. He has looked into grant opportunities, creative partnerships with dance companies and universities, and corporate sponsorships. "We've got to move that way," he said, "if we're going to stay viable." As soon as he can spare some time, Williams will turn himself to the task of shaping a plan to manage and capitalize on Step Afrika!'s growth. In between his rehearsals and weekly performances, Williams struggles to find time for the business side of Step Afrika! Still winded from practice, he ruefully characterized his busy schedule, "What do I do to chill? I don't really chill these days. I'm really twenty-four, seven." **IV**