

DANCING TO SUCCESS



Jamal Callender is living his best life. He has danced across the world and back, touring the United States, Canada, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Europe, Japan and the land of his parents' birth, Barbados.

The professional dancer, who was born in the United States, admits that he never imagined dance would take him this far.

But Callender, who now lives in Germany, traced his dance roots right back to Barbados.

"When I was just one year old, I moved to Barbados to live with my grandmother and aunt. And during my time growing up in Barbados I learned so much about my culture, my family, and this is where my desire to dance developed," he told *Bajan Vibes*, adding that he had been in training from the age of eight.

"I have vivid memories of dancing in the house, on the veranda, in the street and, as cliché as it may sound, I genuinely feel dance chose me.

"Dance has always been something I loved and that came to the forefront when I had to choose between a conservatory and a liberal arts college. At that moment, I knew for sure the career path I wanted had to be in dance," he added.

He was fully supported on that path by his parents. He said they were beside him every step of the way, encouraging him and reminding him they would support him "100 per cent" in his choice.

Confessing that he was one of the lucky ones, he said: "I know many kids who turned down a career in the arts because their parents wanted them to become something that had monetary value."

Putting in the hard work, he started training at Ballet Tech in New York City and attended the Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS) – a school of which American singer, songwriter, record producer, pianist and actress **Alicia Keys** is a graduate.

"PPAS was in conjunction with the Ailey School, home to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, so for four years I trained extensively in the Ailey School in many styles of dance," Callender said.

In addition to training at Ailey, he also went to studios in Brooklyn and Harlem.

"Together, these training programmes enriched me mentally, physically and spiritually [and helped me understand] my body, my craft, my heritage of the Diaspora and the huge legacy that came before me, and the torch I had to carry," he said.

But it would be his decision to audition for the prestigious Juilliard School that would ultimately change his life. He was one of 24 dancers chosen.

"From there, my world opened more," Callender reflected.

He shared that without a doubt, one of the hardest things about being a dancer is the huge commitment required.

"I spend seven to eight hours a day dancing. A normal day consists of training at 10 a.m. followed by rehearsals until 6 p.m. After that, I am either at the gym, physical therapy or on my computer working on the Barbados Dance Project. It can put a strain on your personal and social life," he said, though stressing that he was completely committed to his craft. "I moved away from home and everything I know to work in Germany.

Being a dancer is a lifetime commitment and I am fully invested."

Success differs from person to person and for Callender it is all about consistently showing up, ready and willing.

"Stay ready so you never have to get ready. I worked extremely hard and never allowed myself to get away with things. I knew if I worked hard for myself then the only person I can thank is myself; similarly, if I don't work hard the only person I can blame is myself."

When Callender was asked about his proudest professional achievement thus far, it was a tough question for him to answer.

"There are so many incredible moments in my professional career – from receiving the **Princess Grace Award in Dance**, a prestigious award identifying talented artists, to creating Barbados Dance Project (BDP). But the BDP is special – the continual gift that I will always be thankful for."

He explained that the BDP is a catalyst to raise awareness about dance in Barbados – to "bridge the gap so young kids and dancers on the island could see that dance as a career was possible".

Callender lamented that since the closure of the Barbados National Theatre, there has been no professional level dance training on the island.

"Yes, schools exist giving students dance classes throughout the year, but not at the level needed to advance on an international level. Some have gone on to excel, of course, but there are so many who could also continue but because of the lack of access, it made this venture seem impossible for many young Barbadians."

The idea for the Barbados Dance Project was developed after Callender came to Barbados as a guest tutor for the National Cultural Foundation in 2011 and 2012. With the Barbados Government subsequently cutting NCF funding, the statutory body could no longer cover his expenses. It was that stumbling block that planted the seeds of the Barbados Dance Project idea.

"The bond I had formed with the students was too intense for me to allow the Government to stop this conversation of giving and receiving information through movement," Callender said.

So, on his return to New York, he called a few friends and invited them to his other home – Barbados – to dance.

"I called them and said 'I want to bring some of you down to give classes and really inspire the youth in Barbados', and from there I drafted a business plan and created an ideal budget. But looking at everything, I immediately said to myself, 'this must be 100 per cent tuition free'. If I was going to get the best out of these dancers, I wanted to ensure no hardship or financial burdens would be in the way," the professional dancer shared.

It led him to begin raising funds via **Kickstarter**.

"In 2014, I started with a target of \$15,000 and surpassed it in just a few months. It was a huge success and a big milestone as BDP was officially taking off," he said.

Three years later, his mission remains the same: "To educate, collaborate, and engage with the Barbadian community by offering tuition free dance training."

