

Worth the Weight: The Sustainability of Breaking Culture in Phoenix, Arizona

By

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ABSTRACT

This document outlines the formation and development of Worth the Weight, or WTW, a platform that seeks to sustain the Breaking community in Phoenix, Arizona and connect the generations by bringing them together in a newly and never before seen event in Breaking, an all weight class and division competition. In the last five to ten years there has been a noticeable decline in the local Breaking community, in part due to the introduction of new dance categories, economic and social changes, the cross over of academia and traditional studios in Phoenix; all combining to create a lack of longevity in veterans of the culture to pass on the tools of the trade to the next generation.

WTW is an event that occurs monthly for three consecutive months followed by a month off, totaling nine events and three seasons per calendar year. At each event dancers go head to head in battle in a single elimination style bracket, where they will add a loss or win to their overall season record. The goals of WTW are self-empowerment as well as ownership and investment in the community by those involved through participation in both the event and the planning process; all built on a foundation of trust within the Breaking community. This researcher has thirty years of direct involvement in the Breaking culture with twenty-two of those years as a practitioner in Phoenix, Arizona and co-founder of Furious Styles Crew, Arizona's longest running Breaking crew. The development of WTW was drawn from this experience along with interviews and observations of Breaking communities worldwide. WTW intends to provide a reliable and consistent outlet during a time of instant gratification, allowing a space for self-discovery and the development of tools to be applied beyond movement. It is hoped that

the format of WTW will be a model that can be adapted by other Breaking communities worldwide.

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To all the professors that challenged me along the way at Arizona State University, my peers that were always there for me and my sanity, I thank you all for the time you have all dedicated to myself, and each other. I thank my crew members worldwide, from my Chicago family (CMW) to all those (MZK) members pushing and

upholding traditions of the culture. I'd also like to thank my Arizona, Spain and Denmark (FSC) family who has been with me and believed in me for the past twenty two years, living proof of sustainability in Hip Hop, making us all better people. Thanks to the Arizona Hip Hop and dance community, which without WTW and any projects like it would just be a thought and an empty building. The people are the foundation to this all, in connection with the movement through music creating a voice and platform for us all to be heard.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

I was a Bboy¹ before I ever knew it or had even heard the term. I have been involved as a dancer/artist since 1983 in the city of Chicago, where I first witnessed Breaking at Armstrong Elementary and Potawatomi Park after school and during summer programs in my neighborhood. Breaking culture took a very underground approach for me from 1986 to 1990 when “House”² and “freestyle”³ music took over the music and dance scene, which turned my artistic focus from dancing to being a “Writer,”⁴ while still maintaining my dance craft through freestyle and house.

In transition while moving to Phoenix, Arizona in 1990, I found myself alone and with no creative outlets, which led me to create my first Arizona crew, named Starting The Revolution. Through trials and tribulations this evolved into Styles Upon Styles, which gave birth to Styles Crew. The Breaking section of Styles Upon Styles added Furious to the name to reflect our battle and revived life approach. Furious Style Crew

¹ Bboy/Bgirl (Break boy/Break girl) refers to one who engages in the pursuit of Hip Hop culture specifically in the art of Breaking (BreakDance), which traditionally consist of top rocks, go downs, footwork, spins, and freezes done to Hip Hop, Funk, Soul, and breakbeats music.

² House music, named after The Warehouse club in Chicago where it originated in the early 1980s, is a style of electronic dance music that was developed by dance club DJs that spread to Detroit, New York, and eventually Europe. House music is strongly influenced by elements of the early to mid 1970s soul- and funk-infused dance music style of disco.

³ Freestyle music/Latin Freestyle is a form of dance-pop or electronic dance music that emerged in the United States in the mid-1980s.

⁴ Writer is the original and self-identifying name for graffiti artist.

(FSC) will celebrate its 22nd year anniversary in Phoenix in November 2015. Since 2005, I have also been affiliated with the Mighty Zulu Kingz (MZK), who are given credit as the first organized Bboy crew in Hip Hop. Africa Bambatta, known as the Godfather of Hip Hop, formed this crew and has since passed it on to Alieness, who is world-renowned veteran in the game coming out of the Bronx, New York. My other affiliation is with the movement Break Life, from the man known as the “epitome” of a Bboy, Ken Swift of the seven gems / Break Life (BL). Swift has indirectly and directly served as an inspiration, mentor, and worldwide influence to the Breaking Community, including myself, through his lifetime work in passing on knowledge to the next generation as a manner of sustainability.

Worth the Weight (WTW), a Hip Hop party and dance competition for dancers, Bboys, and Bgirls to test their skills and courage amongst their peers, heroes and inspirations that I developed, has become a platform for communication, culture,⁵ and community in Arizona. Instead of being just another event, WTW has taken on a life of its own, filling gaps in what some called Arizona's “dead” Breaking community and giving new life and a framework for longevity. As an introduction to many and refueling of passion and information for others, WTW stands to bring meaning and value to not just Bboys and Bgirls alone but to all those in the Hip Hop community. With the valuable connections made through community events, WTW is specific to the particular needs of the Phoenix community. Knowledge and wisdom is passed along, inspiring and providing the next generation of Bboys and Bgirls the tools to grow and contribute to the

⁵ Breaking culture consists of specific behaviors, attitudes, values, language, music, and other ways that people share meaning, it’s the “Break Life.”

sustainability of Breaking. Throughout this document I will be referring to Hip Hop as the worldwide movement and culture represented by four basic elements: Breaking, being the movement; Emcee, being the spoken word; Deejay as the music maker; and Writing or Graffiti art as the visual aspect. These elements have been born from the same social and economic street struggle, share a revolutionary aesthetic, and inspire a generation to not just survive but to reinvent the world around them by forming a universal language from which they can transcend their circumstances, creating for participants both a voice and a sense of self worth.

My rationale for the name WTW emerged from an original idea one of my crew mates. Ricky “Rocany,” had for a tee shirt design for a clothing company in the Hip Hop/Breaking Community named “Fat Pounds,” referring to his larger than average size, which contrasts with the typically small and light build of a Bboy. Being a larger and heavier dancer, he could hold his own and was worth his weight, a phrase that he was using in reference to actual weight. The design never came to be, but when he mentioned the idea to me in 2008, I realized that the quote had a double meaning. In the conversation with Ricky “Rocany” I mentioned how the phrase could be interpreted as “worth the wait.” I saw this as a lesson or saying that one can live by and pass onto to the next generation. It applied particularly well to the YouTube generation of dancers that more than ever seem to want instant gratification and perhaps possess an unwillingness or drive to work and give time to their craft, specifically that of Breaking. So I felt the phrase could have this double meaning: that the end result of one’s work and patience in the art is well worth the wait, and that regardless of size, weight, or name that a person holds, pound for pound each person must be worth his or her weight.

The creation of Worth the Weight in August 2012 happened because of a particular need within myself to find a deeper purpose in my journey of organizing and facilitating events in my immediate community of Phoenix, AZ; a community that directly and indirectly reflects the Hip Hop Community worldwide. I looked at the challenges specific to Phoenix and how and why they arose. The initial challenge I decided to address stemmed from my travels as a Bboy in and out of the U.S., which allowed me to notice what was or was not happening in the Arizona Hip Hop Community. Without longevity, there is a lack of “O.G.s,”⁶ a street term referring to veterans of the game (Original Gangsters). This impedes progression of the culture or passing of traditions that happen in many other communities I visited because there are not as many veterans interacting with the younger generations. I have observed that cycle over the past twenty years and how it creates a high turnover rate of dancers due in part to frustration, feelings of slow self-progress, and lack of cohesiveness within the Breaking community itself. Further, I observed disconnections between not only the Bboys and Bgirls and the outside communities, but between individuals with their own families and friends that left them without any personal support. Another factor impacting the continuity of Breaking in Phoenix was the non-existent bridge between the street trained dancers of traditional Breaking styles, the trend dancers, such as those who did “jerking” at the time, and the institutionally trained dancers.

In essence, the Arizona Breaking community was losing the transfer of

⁶ I grew up hearing the term O.G. as a reference to veterans in elements of street culture and not necessarily the more West coast popularized term in gangster rap.

knowledge to the next generation of young artists, which ideally would involve deepening their understanding of self and giving a voice to the invisible kids⁷ that share a similar struggle. This may be partly due to the lack of having, in the past, a common enemy such as poverty and violence. Breaking has had success in the transition of the traditions and community ethics somewhat because of the space, or lack thereof, during the post Vietnam War era that stemmed from poor economic and job conditions in New York City, specifically the Bronx. The economic culture created the most violent gang situations the country had ever seen. “Here was the new math: the South Bronx had lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs; By the mid seventies average per capita income dropped to \$2,430...The official youth employment rate hit 60 percent...the true number was closer to 80” (Chang, 2005, need page #). Breaking developed partially due to the isolation of communities in the economic conditions in the late 60s and early 70s, where people of many ethnicities, but mostly Blacks and Latinos, had few options but to live very close together with minimal safe opportunities outside one’s own neighborhood that would cause or allow one to travel outside their own borough.

Poverty, lack of job opportunities, slumlord housing, and the rise of the gang population and drugs quickly escalated, leading to daily violence and extreme conditions. These conditions brought the youth, particularly the gangs, to a turning point in 1971 where they were to sign a peace treaty. The treaty reads:

To all Brothers and Sisters: We realize that we are all living in the same

⁷ This term describes disenfranchised youth and the process of being heard. It also is title for one of my graduate school projects that involved, kids, paint, cardboard and letters (writing).

neighborhoods and having the same problems. We also realize that fighting amongst ourselves will not solve our common problems. If we are to build up our community to be a better place for our families and ourselves we must work together. We who have signed this treaty pledge peace and unity for all. All of us who have signed this peace will be known as The Family. (Chang, 2005, p. 61)

This environment is where Breaking began. At first, Breaking was “about unleashing youth style as an expression of the soul” (Chang, 2005, p. 111). It is a style of dance that often is interpreted as aggressive because of the passion and unleashing of the youthful struggle. The peace treaty created the possibility for knowledge and styles to safely cross into other neighborhoods, facilitating direct and indirect communication between old and new generations of Bboys and Bgirls. This created a tight and sustainable network of knowledge, at least within New York City’s boroughs, and perhaps specifically to the “The Heart of the Seven-Mile World” surrounding the Bronx.

The passing of rhymes, music, art, movement, vocabulary, styles, and other information across communities and generations was vital for new masters coming up in the game, especially for those that were to become the leaders of the New School,⁸ so that new participants could carry the torch of these traditions and ethics within a newly formed culture. This learned behavior was extremely competitive, raw, and cut-throat due to the simple fact that this new knowledge, and process of creating something were the only things these kids had. They felt voiceless, disenfranchised, and owned nothing of material matter, so this culture was everything to them. Conditioned to hold on to

⁸ A term used in Hip Hop culture to refer to the new or younger generations in comparison to the old school.

anything of value they had in order to survive, they were not about to give this up to just anyone for any reason, but they shared their knowledge selectively with those who were committed for the longevity of the community.

These kids are the children of the ghetto, which had been abandoned by an entire city and country. The invisible ones obsessed with being heard and seen, which made it difficult but critical to stand out, to be original and shine in this very dark time for places like the Bronx. This obsession to feel valued and hold something of value was the essence of having style. In Hip Hop, as my crew and myself have used as a motto and chanted in battles for many years, "style is the key to all forms of rocking." Therefore the passing of traditions and styles has always been of great value. The sharing of those styles earned respect between generations, which affected the The Bboys and Bgirls' own survival as well as that of Breaking could be seen as one and the same.

CHAPTER 2

PHOENIX DISCONNECTION

My personal experiences and the evolution of the events that I have been organizing since 1993 in Phoenix resulted in my observations that led me to the concept now known as Worth The Weight. I asked myself: how do we create longevity, pride, and connections between the traditions of peace, love, and having fun while keeping the community engaged so it may evolve in a natural manner? It seemed that we as a Breaking community could be not only self-sustaining, but that we should be proud to ask outsiders to come witness and support what it is we have such a passion for while reminding ourselves that the dance has been created and grown without approval from mainstream society.

This became very apparent when working with dancers that traveled, whose skills were held in high regard, and were heavily involved in the community. Some even came from supportive families, yet their parents had never seen them dance and had no idea they inspired so many around them. As I reflected on this question I found myself thinking that people might not want to invite their families fearing they might misunderstand what Hip Hop and Breaking are, which happened even to me for many years. This could easily do more harm than good to a possibly disconnected family due to the misrepresentation of Hip Hop, exacerbated by mass media and other negative images surrounding youth culture.

To counter these misrepresentations and to encourage a sense of pride in the Breaking community, I wanted to provide a platform where the more experienced dancers would sense the worth and pride of their own efforts and diligence by witnessing

how they could light the torches and lead the next generation of dancers. In a traditional setting, a person can walk into an event or competition and have a pretty good idea of who is going to take that day's prize. I saw how that could be discouraging, especially to today's youth, who are in a scene that at times seems unbalanced in relation to their own values of what is really important in the dance. When I began Bboying, everyone and everything was still so new and spontaneous that we believed we all had a fighting chance to not only win a contest but to be somebody, all within the context of feeling that these events were our last opportunities for hope. As the competition scene evolved, I saw too many people coming and going and moving on to other things, creating very short-lived Breaking lives in Phoenix. It seemed simple enough—introduce a fair playing ground that will encourage not only newcomers and spectators/supporters, but those involved to be able to clearly see for themselves a road of reachable goals to be the best they can be. This is what motivated the design of the framework for WTW.

In my role as co-founder and “the funky president” (as named by my crew) of FSC since 1993, I have made many mistakes. FSC went from three friends bringing back a childhood love to building an identity when the Breaking community in Arizona really was ready to be reborn like a Phoenix bird rising. From the beginning we felt different from all the other crews; we were the infamous “Styles” crew to most. We were hungry for knowledge and rising in prominence as a crew during very violent times in West Phoenix, but it was also the 1990s, a golden age for Hip Hop music.

A crew has always been a community or its own village. FSC is a community that I have many times been entrusted to lead and or give hope to and have learned so much from. It has seen my good, my bad, my ugly, my youthful ego, and my misplacement of

responsibility at times. FSC will be celebrating twenty-two years this November.

Twenty-two years is a lot of time to make a lot of mistakes. Those years and experiences of looking for that balance to build a sustainable crew, one of longevity and one that advocates for Bboys and Bgirls around the world, has led me to a much humbler road, one of true sacrifice and pure intentions. It was a far stretch from how I grew up and reconnected me with a very raw and competitive time in Breaking, laying on a thick skin to withstand any battle, with the lens that it was all a battle. Every cipher, every jam, every encounter, you battled, no questions were asked. Everyone was a target as you were to them. These experiences breed a very specific approach aligned with a very specific era in Breaking. Just as my battle tactics have evolved and reshaped, so has my approach to running a crew. I now lead my crew by contributing to a larger community through building platforms that give Bboys and Bgirls a place to identify and speak in confidence.

I have been implicitly learning and practicing the skills needed to create nurturing and sustainable communities since 1983 through my participation in crews, parties, shows, neighborhood cliques, and sometimes gangs. I co-founded Chicago's Most Wanted crew in 1987, although my major involvement and commitment has been with FSC of which I am also co-founder and the longest running member since 1993. The journey has been long with many trials and tribulations, blood, sweat, and tears with countless sacrifices in order to not only maintain FSC but to have it grow into a crew that contributes to the worldwide Breaking community and beyond. I have studied other crews around the world so I may learn from them to better my own crew. Also I have learned to be inspired by others ideas and models without trying to duplicate a strategy

that works specifically for that crew and that region. We have gone through sponsors while looking for outside assistance in our efforts to travel and have a voice for Hip Hop and Arizona Breaking. As Bboys and Bgirls we create our own path, work and destinations, without validation from external sources to dictate or set limitations. My more than two decades in Phoenix, AZ as a Bboy, Writer, community supporter, and youth advocate along with my relationship with academia and traditional professional worlds have given me the opportunity to build relationships, street credibility, and a reputation to bridge many communities together. My goal as a Bboy has been similar to how Africa Bambaata, the Ghetto Brothers, and so many others were able to connect people by creating the opportunity for music, art, and customs to cross into all neighborhoods, giving birth to Hip Hop and Breaking as we know it today. I have looked to create a model like the Zulu Nation had set out to be, that is a voice for all coming from a struggle, regardless of what that struggle looks like. United we can come together and create a strong Breaking community that will flourish for generations to come.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNITY AND CONTRIBUTORS

In many of the early events I facilitated, in particular the FSC Anniversary, one person stepped up to the plate to get involved in assisting me and became my right hand man: Johnny Castro. Johnny could be considered the official emcee/host for any Arizona event, particularly battles and showcases such as WTW. He is an expert at keeping an event on time, entertaining the crowd and always setting a positive vibe when on the microphone. We have both been part of the Arizona Hip Hop and Breaking community for over 20 years. This longevity allows us to bring many different resources, and we have become trusted by the community and in turn well supported. When I decided to start putting together WTW, my conceptual framework for it was loosely based on athletic formats that we see in everyday sports such as boxing or the mixed martial arts, because the Breaking community has some crossover influences from these types of models. Johnny has knowledge and experience participating in and organizing sporting events as well as recent involvement with a Breaking league where they base the rankings and scoring of teams using a football model.

My experience in directly competing in the Breaking scene as well as organizing Breaking events for more than twenty years, Johnny's experiences, and the great relationship and respect Johnny and I hold for each other seemed to be a perfect fit, so I brought him in as my partner for this new project. Once again, we were back as a dynamic duo, this time to build and lead a small but growing team of volunteers. By combining and complementing each other's attributes while still challenging each other's ideas, we have been able to create a structure to promote longevity beyond a single event.

The initial WTW team was the staff and volunteers of Cyphers, the Center for Urban Arts that I co-founded in early 2012, as well as my parents, other friends and family members of Cyphers' employees, and FSC. Our team of volunteers then grew to involve students from ASU's classes in Urban Movement Practices, which created a direct and welcoming bridge to and from higher education, which at one time I found alienating and hierarchal (i.e., academia vs. streets). The WTW volunteer/intern network has now grown even deeper to involve not only parents, but also young participants of WTW who are interested in learning about events and all that is involved. This works well in creating an understanding between event "promoters," the general public, and those coming to compete. The feedback loop connects these different people and serves as a very valuable tool. The participating volunteers, most of whom also compete, have a personal investment in the WTW community and become additional eyes, ears, and mouths, providing a direct line of communication that reveals misconceptions, assumptions, and misunderstandings that often break the support and involvement from the community. By identifying those communication breakdowns, we can address problems and issues before they grow to have negative effects.

Music is an extremely vital ingredient to any Hip Hop event's recipe, and so the Deejays had to be chosen with this in mind. Like everyone else on the team, they had to be open to this new concept and be willing to go for the unknown ride we were about to embark on since we had no idea of how the community would react. The first Deejays on the roster were Deejay Tyger and Deejay Panic; we felt they represented different levels of experience and had been previously collaborating with them through Cyphers' events.

This created a comfortable relationship and we were confident that they would align with this new way of working.

Since the early stages of WTW, another contributing force is the same person who created the original slogan name of WTW, Ricky “Rocany” Romo. In July 2012 he began to personally give out ”Originality Stands Alone” awards at events, which led to his involvement as an award sponsor providing medals for the winners. He has been a supporter not only individually and through his powerful movement but with his “Originally Stands Alone” clothing line that now sponsors events and awards the dancer at the event that best reflects the “OSA” ethics.

CHAPTER 4

FRAMEWORK

WTW is an event that occurs monthly for three consecutive months followed by a month off, totaling nine events and three seasons per calendar year. This structure allows us to consistently reevaluate the needs of the community and the WTW framework. At each event dancers go head to head in battle in a single elimination style bracket, where they will add a loss or win to their overall season record. The system of keeping records of wins and losses for each participant and a final overall record of the season encourages consistency and paints a clear picture of where each dancer stands. These records are kept track of the day of the event by both the person hosting each weight class and a separately assigned volunteer to cross reference the data, which we then post on our event page and official website, www.worththeweight602.com. The cash prize every month increases per weight class so that a larger award is given for the overall season champion, which includes his or her very own trading card with a photo and career statistics, like the trading cards of other sport genres.

Johnny and myself consulted with members in the Breaking community to come up with the weight class and division guidelines and individuals can choose their own weight class, promoting self-evaluation and honesty. Competitors' wins and losses from each event are then recorded and posted after each event. The overall winner of a division automatically moves up a weight class, while second and third rankings have the option to stay in their current weight class or move up a division. Those at the bottom of the weight class must move to a lighter weight class and work their way back up, causing participants to be more thoughtful and perhaps honest when first choosing a weight class.

The actual structure that I use today for the competition involves two categories: Breaking and Freestyle in three “weight” divisions:

Light Weight

- Zero to few competitions
- Some experience battling but has never passed the preliminary rounds
- One year or less of dance experience

Middle Weight

- Always make it past preliminary battle rounds
- Has previously ranked in top three of light weight division
- Consistently in top sixteen bracket
- One to three years dance experience

Heavy Weight

- Has previously ranked in top three in of middle weight division
- Five to ten years dance experience
- Consistently in top eight bracket, regularly in top four, and has participated in many final rounds

Although the initial conversations that led to WTW occurred in 2008, the first event, WTW1, did not happen until August 18, 2012, in Phoenix, AZ. On January 11, 2011, the keys to the building that would become Cyphers were handed to me. Almost immediately, Johnny and I found ourselves needing to host events to finance Cyphers. This financial need had me concentrating on events that would create revenue. In the past this had never been my motivation; instead it was more about being able to sustain the next event as opposed to making rent. The new perspective had me a feeling burned out,

empty, dishonest, and stressed. When I decided to leave the facility I specifically remember thinking and saying to my Cyphers business partner, “This is no longer feeling like Hip Hop to me.”

During this time I was always looking for inspiration for events from places outside of the Hip Hop community. I felt I was regurgitating the same event formulas, being safe, and not allowing myself to be playful in my visions. That method and approach was not Hip Hop. Instead Hip Hop to me has been that fountain of youth that always reminded me not to “grow up” and take things too seriously. WTW rekindled memories of the times that make me smile eternally, times of an innocent, but a mischievous childhood—playing kick the can, Johnny tackle, and follow the leader on stairs, rooftops, and fences until I was the last kid out on the block playing.

These games and the ideas of them are what keep me going and re-energize me daily. I had lost this a bit by taking on a business approach that only focused on the financial sustainability of Cyphers, while also starting a new academic chapter by pursuing my Masters of Fine Arts in Dance at Arizona State University (ASU). These newly realized connections have led to the overall vibe of WTW, a place where all feel welcomed, encouraged and supported while maintaining a hunger to exceed one’s expectations and grow each time in competition. The goal is an evening of playing fields where all get a fair and realistic opportunity to excel with the involvement and investment from so many in the community, taking Breaking back to the people from the people.

While at ASU, the more technical language and methods of teaching, required openness and respect of diverse dance forms and ideas, and the balance between theory and practice that I was now absorbing as a graduate student began showing up in the

events I was facilitating for the Breaking community. My time as a student has allowed me to reflect and be reminded that every individual and their experiences are valuable, which is a lesson people seem to overlook. However, my experience at ASU also felt restricting because of the many rules and deadlines, my past experiences with the American educational system, and my already defensive, battle mentality that I had been nurturing since 1983. My lens and perspective for entering battle situations and how this affects the growth of each Breaking community had already been shifting through my travels to New York, NY, Spain, Rome, Finland, and Holland. These experiences tied in with academia took me on a journey not solely as a Bboy, but truly as a student with an additional perspective from which to observe the Breaking culture.

I went into graduate school feeling that I needed to protect Hip Hop and myself as ASU was launching the Urban Movement Practices curricular strand. Those feelings took me back to my childhood, when often, if not always, I felt like I had to have my guard up. When seeing gang bangers or the police during my youth, I became nervous and had to be prepared for anything. It took me back to the importance of remaining cool but being ready to battle at any moment. Hip Hop similarly makes something positive out of a negative, for both individuals and a community. In my youth, I had to learn how each gang on different blocks operated and “flagged”⁹ their colors, what the pitfalls were, and what was acceptable and unacceptable; all of which meant survival. At ASU, the connections I was making about my resistance to new ideas and my past experiences

⁹ In Chicago, where I spent most of my childhood, flagging meant the flashing of colors and signs related to neighborhood gangs.

were coming to light, and I was able to embrace those connections, the differences, crossovers, and shared ideals.

I had new hope in the face of these new struggles and finding ways to overcome and utilize them in a positive manner, which I tried to pass on to my community. I read once that the job of a true leader was not to lead but to keep hope alive; this always stuck in my head. The combination of what I was exposed to in graduate school and my experiences with Breaking taught me to approach not just my studies and craft but all important aspects in my life with a deeper purpose, and to reflect on the things that I overlooked because I “just did” them and they became part of my norm. My time and mentoring through ASU’s graduate program in dance allowed me to take a step back and see not only the bigger picture of Breaking and dance through examples of socially engaged art; but also created a space for appreciating the creative process while discovering and gathering my views, philosophies and approaches. This brought me to reflect on challenges in the Phoenix Breaking scene, because as a Bboy in development since 1983, Breaking has always been held close to my heart. It took me back to KRS-One’s¹⁰ description of Hip Hop as “conscious movement,” which refers to Hip meaning to know, to be conscious, and Hop as the movement (KRS-One, 2013).

In the beginning stages of WTW in 2012, I had also just co-founded Cyphers. My vision was that Cyphers would become the mecca of all Hip Hop and Urban art forms in Arizona as well as unite all walks of life and provide a safe playground for all. Cyphers was to be a home that was welcoming to all ideas and welcoming to the new and old, so

¹⁰ KRS-One is an acronym for knowledge reigns supreme over nearly everything.

naturally that was to be the birthplace of WTW. However around the time I started graduate school, Cyphers needed to relocate. After making sure Cyphers was relocated to a new building and I started my graduate studies, I handed the business responsibilities to my Cyphers partner.

The new facility did not have the space or feeling that WTW needed, so I turned to two of my long time friends and FSC members, Deejay “Pete Salaz” and Deejay “Senbad,” who have nurtured and continue to nurture the dance community, in particular the “House” music scene, for well over a decade. In the past they helped me find venues that would work with the Hip Hop community, which had always been the greatest challenge in facilitating events. They also had become owners of Bar Smith and what is now the Monarch Theatre, located in the heart of downtown Phoenix. I wanted to create opportunities in these venues, which were ideal for hosting and co-facilitating events. My friends were extremely supportive to opening their doors to us and being flexible like no other venues ever would. As artists, they understood the struggle of finding event and project space in Arizona. The venue had the space and an incredible sound system, which can make or break an event, allowing us to provide that “club” feeling of a party. Additionally, it was conducive to the high energy of the dancers and passion felt in the battles. The Monarch Theatre is the current home of WTW.

CHAPTER 5

THE EVENT

On August 18th, 2012 the unexpected happen at WTW1. On this Saturday afternoon, which was early for a typical event, we were shocked and certainly caught off guard by the quantity and quality of participants and spectators WTW1 attracted. We only saw such a high volume turn out once a year in the Arizona Breaking community at the FSC Anniversaries. At WTW1 we had set up a registration table and kids showed up before the doors even opened, which was very rare. Everyone came ready to pay his or her ten-dollar donation with no complaints, also unexpected. The line to register to battle was overwhelming for our tiny staff. We had no idea that the community would react this way or that we would have more new people than regulars in attendance.

When watching the participants dance, it was obvious these faces were only new to us, because they definitely had Breaking experience. It was like people coming out of some gigantic closet, perhaps in search of more training. I remember asking a few of them how long they had been dancing and why I had never seen them at any of my past events. Most answers were similar: the fear or knowledge that they would come to an event with no chance beyond a quick preliminary round to represent, to shine, to let their voice be heard and feel growth. The energy in the room at WTW1 was almost one of relief, a deep and settling breath of fresh air from everyone. I remember thinking and later talking with Johnny about how the community really NEEDED this; it was so obvious.

What happened at WTW1 reflected what my experiences to this point had done for me in my lifetime. Even if it was only that one time, it still was magical. The

attendance at WTW1 led to our longest event ever. The finals for the last category, the heavy weight class, happened after one in the morning. Even at that time, the attendance, energy, and smiles were just as strong as they were at noon when we opened up our doors. We were so inspired from this first WTW, but realized we certainly had some fine-tuning to do to ensure the quality and sustainability of future events. Our expenses included paying each of the eighteen judges and the Deejays, making a donation to the venue, marketing costs, and six cash prizes. Clearly we had to budget carefully. The cost of the judges, who would likely also be competing and possibly winning money, put a huge dent into the overhead.

In speaking with the judges, their reactions demonstrated how much they appreciated the event and supported the new formula that WTW was bringing to the table. Some actually offered to take no pay that same night while almost everyone appreciated the opportunity to judge since many had little past experience. We decided to pay the Heavy Weight judges and asked the rest of the judges to volunteer their time, as it was an opportunity to learn and grow as judges and dancers. We also asked all participants, including the judges, to pay the ten-dollar participation/entrance fee. Everyone was in full support of this decision; their response was like night and day compared to the past events.

The break down of weight classes and categories became not only platforms for the dancers, but created a learning platform for deejays and judges. Judging has been a controversial issue in the dance community, with up to now no real solution in sight. Traditionally Bboys and Bgirls compete and when they become “good” from a promoter’s standpoint, which can also mean “popular” or “my friend,” they suddenly are

put on a judging panel with absolutely no past experience as a judge and/or sometimes without any battling experience. By applying this framework from WTW, we open up the space for people to not only gain judging experience as they grow as dancers but to become empathetic to those that do take on the challenge and pressure in judging a battle. The participants take on a whole new attitude towards judges and being judged once they experience this process for themselves.

We choose judges and the weight class they will judge according to the amount of experience they have dancing and judging, which for many might be years dancing and zero judging. The less experienced judges are placed with two other more experienced judges to create a balance on the judging panel. As competitors work their way up the weight classes, they would be set to judge the weight class under their own. As athletic artists that put so much of their soul into each battle, having fair judges that the community trusts is very important. I have survived many cycles in the Phoenix Breaking community to know that judges can be very frustrating for dancers to the point they no longer want to participate in the competitions, thereby removing themselves from a major network of communication and sharing of knowledge and experience. WTW has created a platform for interaction between the judges and competitors, the host and the audience, creating honest communication and understanding of positions. This atmosphere is essential for WTW, knowing that everyone involved is a student and will never stop learning. Be it the dancers, deejays, emcees, judges, or staff; we are a community that depend on each other.

As WTW evolved, we recognized that the same platform for opportunity and growth was presenting itself to the Deejays. We were able to offer new and inexperienced

artists time on the turntables by assigning them scheduled time to play as well as applying the same mind frame of the weight classes and guidelines we set for dancers. In other words, under WTW guidelines, a Deejay that would be considered a lightweight would play music for the lightweight battles division or even open the event during open ciphers time. This allowed less experienced Deejays to also grow and express themselves while learning from the more experienced Deejays. It also fostered a sustainable relationship among the Deejays by creating that experience for the newer Deejays to not only watch and learn the process, but to ask questions in what might normally be an unattainable experience. The more experienced Deejays playing in the heavy weight divisions now found themselves mentoring the younger generation of Deejays by passing on skills and techniques. Once again this created a sense of pride, ownership, and sustainability of knowledge about the craft and its application in this setting.

The interest and opportunity that WTW built for those wanting to know about organizing an event also appeared. Organizing events is no easy venture in the Breaking community, not only due to lack of resources and financial capital, but because of the criticism from one's peers, and the million opinions everyone voices after the fact. Event organizing is a skill that most in the Breaking community are not willing to share with others. To meet these needs we have weekly meetings to give people interested in hosting their own events hands on experience in not only the process but also in the set up, scheduling, and running of the event. We often encourage people to take matters into their own hands in a way that is similar to how we teach a basic move that students are then expected to make original by adding their own ingredients. We have managed to build and delegate the workload of WTW to the point where we continue to fine tune the

event so it practically runs itself with all the different moving parts. This has given participants confidence to branch out on their own, and they are now creating and organizing their own events with their own ideas, focus, and purpose.

As WTW has become more stable and consistent, we are able to sponsor workshops free of charge to WTW participants. This creates employment opportunities for Bboys/Bgirls that probably would not exist for many years to come. It also makes it more feasible for us to invite judges from out of state if we can offer them a small honorarium for judging in addition to being paid to teach a workshop. The idea is to offer these free workshops in partnership with a variety of hosts throughout Phoenix and beyond. This is as an opportunity for studios and academic settings to serve as workshop hosts and build bridges between traditional studios, educational institutions, and Hip Hop culture like never before. For the winners of each weight class, we also sponsor a private session with a more experienced WTW dancer, perhaps one they have watched work their way up the ranks and that has been inspiring to them, making it financially feasible and approachable for young dancers of Arizona.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE

WTW came to be and has catapulted to be Arizona's most influential Breaking event, continuing to feed itself and the community as a platform of communication, education and sustainability. Hip Hop historically was equally born and created organically as a response to a social struggle, which ignited a revolution for the people of New York to nurture and create a community for survival and sustainability. From this emerged a culture that we now know as Hip Hop, with elements of art, music, voice, consciousness, self-empowerment, and a movement to reflect these specific times that we call Breaking. Bboys and Bgirls alike creating through a search for self identity, through a way of life and craft that has become a right of passage and tool for survival for so many beyond the inner cities and ghettos of its origins to a voice that can now be heard around the world.

As a researcher and practitioner of Breaking culture for the past thirty years, my recent work as a graduate student and the world wide travels Breaking has taken me on, I have had the opportunity to experience first hand the continuing effects and opportunities Breaking continues to have for so many on a global scale. These observations have also allowed me to take notice of the need and gaps Phoenix Breaking culture has been experiencing in recent years, with introductions of new popular styles, adult responsibility and the lack of any sustainable platform for opportunity to meet these challenges and secure the survival and growth of Bboys and Bgirls in Phoenix. These modes to overcome all obstacles by any means necessary and methods apply in FSC of which I am co-founder and president of, and which to date is the longest running and

only Breaking crew in Arizona (?) to survive from the nineties to the present. This combined with my own challenges to maintain a consistent level of growth and longevity, along with the new lens that academic experiences have given me, mix into the melting pot of WTW, mirroring the melting pot that Hip Hop culture is. Endurance has allowed me to build numerous positive relationships with people from all walks of life that directly and indirectly have become supporters of WTW, breathing new life into the community with the youngsters, side by side the wisdom and tools that the O.G.s contribute and share.

The Arizona community has shown a pattern and inconsistency that can be seen in the turn over and short-lived Breaking life of participants over the past three decades. Inconsistencies, lack of opportunities for involvement, and lack of available resources of knowledge for the new generations, have left so many who were involved lost and disconnected. This has been a dangerous cycle for the survival of Breaking in Phoenix with new challenges, old habits, not enough leadership to go around, a cycle of disorganization, a lack of accountability, and burnouts. The framework of WTW is built with the Hip Hop philosophies of creating a positive from a negative. Taking the challenges specific to Phoenix, WTW shows to be a solid step forward and contributor to the sustainability of Breaking culture in Phoenix. It is a gathering of communities from all over Arizona in an even playing ground of weight classes of experience, and equal opportunity for all to share their own styles, methods, and creativity with the next person, WTW has given inspiration, welcoming many new faces while encouraging O.G.s to become involved. Creating opportunities for dialogue and the “each one, teach one” method of interaction for everyone involved, from the dancers, deejays and judges to the

interns learning and applying new knowledge to give flight to new platforms under a lens of their own. WTW's future is one of growth and it will continue to promote awareness of our community and ensure the survival of Breaking in Phoenix, in addition to contributing to Breaking culture worldwide.

In all my travels and participation around the world, nothing like WTW is in play. It is unique in its concept to fill gaps specific to the Phoenix community, though similar needs are being met in communities around the world in other ways. I had conversations and interviews with Bboys and Bgirls varying in location, generation, and personal experiences in order to validate what I had been experiencing and observing in WTW. I found that the overall goal for all of the communities I spoke with was to pass on tools and information as an authentic and first hand experienced driven knowledge. Without a consistent platform to fill these needs and share, the desire and wisdom become irrelevant, a too often heard story of the ghetto.

Thus, WTW utilizes a framework that is open to all but not an overwhelming approach in its presentation, one that allows for the self-discovery, empowerment, and value of each individual that is present at our events. The concept is that Bboys and Bgirls may take these new discoveries back to their own communities, grow, then come back and contribute to WTW. This creates a cycle of sustainability: a multi purpose platform of education and values that builds bridges to other outlets and dance communities. WTW will continue to do its part in creating jobs through workshops as well as direct mentoring through WTW sponsored one-on-one sessions between veteran and new dancers. Those most closely connected to WTW also will dig deeper to discover more methods and approaches to facilitate dialogue and education for judges.

The framework is universal because it crosses over to other elements of Breaking culture such as Deejaying, Writing, etc. It also can help to serve Breaking communities worldwide, addressing their specific needs, and highlighting their strengths. With this in mind we are planning on collaborating with groups inside and outside of the US, taking WTW on the road. By utilizing these networks and opportunities, we then connect those cities with Phoenix, spreading the framework and web across communities worldwide. In times when funding is constantly pulled from community organizations and the arts in a challenging economy, we as a community are set to repeat unhealthy cycles that can only be a step backwards. WTW has demonstrated its consistency and strength in growing numbers as a solid step to not only the survival of Breaking in Phoenix and the community of Bboys and Bgirls, but to its process and sustainability. The culmination of decades of experiences and values represented in the blueprint of WTW are certainly showing to be Worth the Wait.

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