

# DanceTeacher®



ASHLEY BROWN (CENTER) WITH HER STUDENTS. PHOTO BY MACLAINE LOWERY, COURTESY BROWN.

## Office Hours with Martha Graham School's Ashley Brown



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When [Ashley Brown](#) was a sophomore at Spelman College, she was asked to substitute-teach a ballet class for children. The rest, as they say, is history. Brown ended up taking over the ballet class long-term, as well as teaching jazz and creative movement. She also became assistant director of the school's Children's

Drama and Dance Performance Theater. "I really fell in love with seeing the students grow and develop," she says.

Brown went on to receive her master of fine arts in dance performance and choreography from Florida State University before moving to New York City. Now, she serves as the director of the Martha Graham School, where she brings her vast knowledge in not only dance education but leadership and production management.

Brown was the artistic director of a faith-based dance group, BT Dance, for eight years and owns a production management company, Heartworks Productions. She was the founding high school dance teacher for Brooklyn's Prospect Schools Charter network, where she designed the dance curriculum and established the International Baccalaureate Dance Program. In addition to her current role at the Martha Graham School, Brown consults with The Juilliard School in the K-12 Division as a dance-curriculum specialist specifically supporting dance programs in Vietnam.



PHOTO BY REBECCA OVIATT, COURTESY BROWN.

Brown spoke with *Dance Teacher* about continuing Graham's legacy, the value of preparing dance students with a variety of skill sets, and her advice for today's educators.

### **What do you love most about being the director of the Martha Graham School?**

One of the things I love is being a part of a woman-founded and woman-led institution. We're about to celebrate 100 years in 2026, but it's still radical what Martha Graham did starting a company and a school during the 1920s. It's a really exciting time to be here and preparing the next generation of dancers.

### **What do you think is the biggest challenge that dance educators face today when it comes to teaching the next generation?**

There is a need for more support for our students, but I think there isn't always training for educators to be able to meet all of those needs or to point students in the [right] direction. Mental health support is one area.

Mental awareness wasn't always something I was trained with as a dancer. So, I have to be aware of work-life balance for myself and then model that for my students.

I also think [students and educators] having skill sets in a range of art, nonprofit, and leadership positions [is important]. If you understand production, it might actually be cheaper for you to self-produce your show if you know how to run the light board, edit music, or make a costume.

Also networking, because [students] will see the people [they] are in class with now later in [their] career. Those kinds of things were very gray when I was training, so just making these more transparent now so students can start thinking about them.

### **What has been the best advice you have received as a dance educator?**

One of the best pieces of advice I've received was to teach the students that are in front of you; don't just give exercises and steps, but really help students take ownership of their learning experience. Show them what they are capable of and give them the tools to do those things.

### **Have you had a role model as a dance educator?**

I would say one of my role models is someone I have always admired from afar, Denise Jefferson, the [late] director at the Alvin Ailey School. When I was an Ailey student, she would take class with us and that was powerful to see the school director in my classes. Her visibility made an impact on me. I didn't know her personally, but the way she showed up has definitely shaped me as a dance educator and leader.

### **What's "one thing" that's unique about your teaching style?**

Before the pandemic, I was an aerial dancer, and the teacher used Skinner Releasing Technique to help us get present in our bodies and how we were feeling. It helped us connect with our bodies since aerial dancing can become dangerous very quickly. Skinner Releasing is a somatic practice that has a letting-go checklist which I sometimes include in my classes to help students be present in the moment.

### **What's your advice for today's dance educators?**

Be the teacher, advocate, and supporter that you needed as a student. We don't have to carry training trauma because we experienced it. We can be the change that we want to see.