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## Grrrl Brigade, 15 Years of Social-Feminist Dance

by **Marivel Mendoza And Emma Miller**

**Grrrl Brigade** is a dance leadership program that fosters female empowerment through dance. Based out of Dance Mission Theater, Dance Brigade's Grrrl Brigade has instructed more than 500 girls over the last 15 years in modern dance, taiko drumming, hip hop, belly dance, performance, self-empowerment, and social justice rooted in feminist thought. 45 Grrrls have attended Ruth Asawa School for the Arts in various disciplines.

Grrrl Brigade has performed throughout the Bay Area and greater California, being featured at One Billion Rising, Walk Against Rape, Women against War, the De Young Museum, CounterPulse's Blessed Unrest Festival, the San Francisco International Taiko Festival, Carnaval SF, KQED Art's Creative Resistance Salon, SF Public Library, and the first biennial Mission Youth Arts Festival.

In celebration of Grrrl Brigade's 15th anniversary [April 28-29 at the Cowell Theater](#), this article was co-written by Marivel Mendoza and Emma Miller. These young women attended Dance Mission from the time they were three years old until they graduated from high school. They attended School of the Arts in Dance and they continue to work and be leaders at Dance Mission Theater, teaching in both the Youth and Grrrl Brigade programs.

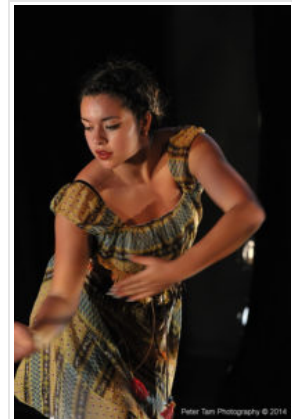
**Marivel Mendoza:** In the woman operated building of Dance Mission, there brews the fierce force of the Grrrl Brigade. Established in 2004, Grrrl Brigade's mission is to arm girls with feminist wisdom to face the world confident and empowered in their own voices and visions. The program focuses not only on dance, drumming, and performance technique, but it also includes reflective discussions and inclusive work around the social issues that young women are facing in our local communities and world. These feminist ideals have helped guide young women, and have planted a seed of deep devotion for all of us to work towards helping other young girls have the confidence they deserve.

**Emma Miller:** Having programs like Grrrl Brigade is important for the community, but especially for the Bay Area's urban "grrrls". For the vast majority of the girls in the program it is a second home. There is a sense of comfort when you enter Dance Mission—the vibrant painted walls invites everyone to dance and relieve stress without judgement. Grrrl Brigade is a sisterhood and no one is turned away due to their identity, size, or 'natural' dance ability.

**MM:** I was a founding member of the Jr. GRRRL Brigade, for ages 9-12 years. Before then, Grrrl Brigade was just for teens. I was entering Jr. GRRRL Brigade from a slightly conservative Mexican household, with very traditional ideals of what it meant to be a woman. At Dance Mission I had the freedom to be more than what was expected of me and even to experiment with what I believed in, moving away from just accepting what I was told. At that young age it was the only place where adults cared about how I felt about the way the world was moving around me. I was asked about how I felt and they truly cared to know my ideas on how to make a difference.

**EM:** I started coming to Dance Mission when I was three years old and continued attending throughout my childhood, exploring a wide range of classes like taiko drumming, hip hop, belly-samba and modern dance. When I turned nine, I was finally old enough to be a part of Jr. Grrrl Brigade. At the beginning of my freshman year in high school, I started working as a dance teacher's assistant for the same Creative Movement class that I took as a toddler. At the end of high school, I was offered a teaching position in the program and I officially started teaching in the fall of my first year in college at the University of San Francisco.

**MM:** Dance is a vulnerable medium. There is no anonymity, and it is too obvious if faked or done only half way. Dance is an organic way to teach



girls and youth about facing fears and being courageous. As a teacher I'm trying to create unafraid, unapologetic artists for the future who will not shy away from telling their truths. GRRRL Brigade has taught me to be brave in my truth, and be vocal with it so that others may find comfort and solidarity with it also. Live performance takes this a step further by pulling emotions directly from the audience and using that as fuel to give more, in a constant cycle of exchanging energy. Dance is daring, and as a dancer I am lucky to be empowered through making and sharing my art. I am grateful every day for Grrrl Brigade's trust, guidance, and generosity in their teachings of how to be a productive woman in our world.

**EM:** Being a part of a junior company like Grrrl Brigade, requires a particular type of discipline. Girls learn to be accountable for their own actions, contribute to a group effort, manage their busy schedules between school and dance, and how to take care of themselves: physically, mentally and emotionally. Having such strong bonds between girls, no matter the age, is a crucial aspect of the program and is significant in the girls' socioemotional development. The constant love and support between students, teachers and parents is what draws families back to Grrrl Brigade year after year.

The concept of female empowerment is a fundamental element of the Grrrl Brigade program. For young women today, female empowerment comes in many forms. It is finding the courage to stand up, use your voice and know that you can make a difference in society.

Throughout the generations, the notion of female empowerment has transformed. Women have progressively been fighting for equality and are gaining more rights. Even so, the struggle is not over. We have recently experienced a surge in women expressing their inner strengths and are taking the opportunity to be vulnerable and be truth tellers, despite the backlash. The movement to tear down the patriarchal status quo still continues.

Grrrl Brigade has given me the opportunity to have strong female examples while being a student in the program, and now has given me the opportunity to be a role model for my own students. I am fortunate to experience seeing students go from youth program to Grrrl Brigade, as I did years ago. I am grateful to be a part of a feminist community that uses the arts to bring awareness and advocates for social justice, and pushes towards global peace. I am proud to be a part of a social movement, such as when I participated in One Billion Rising, Eve Ensler's worldwide campaign that aims to use the arts to bring an end towards rape and violence against women. I am also fortunate to be exposed to the San Francisco dance community at large, and was fortunate to join Dance Brigade in celebrating its 40th year anniversary last winter.



**Nasha Harris Santiago**, my peer and a graduate from Grrrl Brigade who now is a freshman at Boston University says, "To me, Grrrl Brigade, means family, sisterhood, and using our love for dance to help make a difference in this world. Grrrl Brigade gave me a community and group of friends I know I will have for the rest of my life. Grrrl Brigade helped me realize my worth as a young girl and now as a young woman."

Another member of Grrrl Brigade who graduated in 2016, **Miya Herstein** describes the program as "an unwavering energy." She continues, "It doesn't matter where our grrrls travel or what obstacles we find ourselves up against; we can always channel this force. Grrrl Brigade fostered my growth, served as a comfortable escape from life's tribulations, and provided me a medium to

express myself. It is my roots, my sustenance, my motivation. Without it, I would be lost. Without it, I would not be me."

*Marivel Mendoza is graduating this May with from SF State with a B.A. in Dance and a minor in Education. Emma Miller is on schedule to graduate 2020 from USF with a B.A. in Psychology and a minor in Performing Arts and Social Justice with a focus in Dance. Both have performed professionally with Dance Brigade and Alayo Dance Company on stages large and small, including YBCA, Laney College Theater, and Dance Mission Theater.*



## About Marivel Mendoza and Emma Miller

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PUBLISHED [April 1, 2018](#)  
POSTED IN [In Dance](#)  
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