

Collage Dance Receives Mellon Foundation Grant

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By A.A. Cristi

Collage Dance – one of the largest Black-led performing arts organizations in the South and one of only a few professional ballet companies in the world with a roster of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) dancers – has announced that it will receive a two million dollar grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

The transformative grant will help Collage Dance fund various strategic projects through 2026, including growing its staff and infrastructure to better serve the community, in addition to investing in artistic expansion and increased engagement throughout Memphis and beyond. Grant funds will help the organization move towards its vision of becoming a leading, world-class dance institution and creating more inclusive, relevant ballet.

Collage Dance's initial invitation and participation in the Comprehensive Organizational Health Initiative (COHI) in partnership with the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) helped spark initial interest by the Mellon Foundation in Collage Dance's work.

"This grant from the Mellon Foundation is a vital contribution to our organization, and also demonstrates a transformative commitment to and investment in Black dance organizations. This multi-year grant empowers Collage Dance to continue to realize many strategic goals around capacity building and engage in thoughtful expansion throughout all areas of our organization. We are so grateful to the Mellon Foundation for their support," said Founding Executive Director Marcellus Harper.

The Mellon Foundation is the largest funder of the arts and humanities in the U.S. Mellon believes that the arts and humanities are where we express our complex humanity, and believes that everyone deserves the beauty, transcendence, and freedom to be found there. Through its grants, the foundation seeks to build just communities enriched by meaning and empowered by critical thinking, where ideas and imagination can thrive.

Collage Dance also announces Derwin Sisnett as its new Chair of its Board of Directors. Sisnett has been a member of the Board since 2016. Sisnett succeeds Jim Jenkins, who served twelve years as the Chair of Collage Dance's Board of Directors and remains an active Board member. During his tenure as Board Chair, Jenkins successfully led Collage Dance's \$11 million capital campaign.

Derwin is the co-founder and CEO of Adaptive Commons, a real estate company that invests in the transformation of civic spaces for social good. Prior to Adaptive Commons, Derwin co-founded and co-led Maslow Development Inc., a real estate and community development firm that advises, designs, and develops mixed-use communities anchored by high-quality

schools. Prior to Maslow, Derwin co-founded and served as the CEO of Gestalt Community Schools. In partnership with the Menkiti Group, Derwin also co-founded Grove Social Impact Partner's Obsidian Catalyst Fund, a real estate investment vehicle that aims to drive neighborhood-level social impact by capitalizing a new category of Black real estate developers. Derwin has held private, mayoral- and gubernatorial-appointed board seats at healthcare, foundation, education, and arts-based companies. He holds a bachelor's degree from Emory University, a PhD from the University of Memphis, and he is an alumnus of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design where he was a Loeb Fellow.

"I have long admired Collage's dedication to the youth of the Memphis community and beyond. I look forward to helping lead Collage Dance into its next phase of growth. The tangible support of the Mellon Foundation grant marks an excellent springboard into the next era of the organization as we work to increase the number of students we serve through our dance education programs, and continue to expand the reach of our professional touring company," said new Board Chair Derwin Sisnett.

Recently named a "Southern Cultural Treasure" by South Arts and the Ford Foundation, Collage Dance is one of the largest Black-led performing arts organizations in the South and one of just a few professional ballet companies in the world with a roster of BIPOC dancers.

Working to inspire the growth and diversity of ballet, Collage Dance Collective showcases a repertoire of relevant choreography and world-class dancers representative of the communities we serve. The professional company has presented thirteen full-length seasons in Memphis, plus national and international touring presenting a diverse range of classical and contemporary choreography from George Balanchine, Nacho Duato, Ulysses Dove, Joshua Manculich, Amy Hall Garner, Kevin Iega Jeff and more.

Its institutional arm, the Collage Dance Conservatory, trains more kids of color in a classical art form than any other non-profit in the region.

In December 2020, Collage opened a 22,500 square foot state-of-the-art facility to expand its programming, training and impact.

The work of Collage Dance Collective has been featured in media outlets including Huffington Post, Allure, Yahoo!, The Commercial Appeal, Afropunk, Dance Magazine and Pointe Magazine.

Learn more at www.collagedance.org.

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