

# No Small Matter: Creating an Anti-Racist Organization



Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder and chief visionary partner of [Urban Bush Women](#), received the National Guild's 2019 Leadership Award at the Conference for Community Arts Education in Austin, TX, this November. The award recognizes Jawole's innovative work to promote leadership, equity, and social justice through

dance and cultural expression. In 1984, Jawole founded Urban Bush Women (UBW) as a performance ensemble dedicated to exploring the use of cultural expression as a catalyst for social change. In their words, Urban Bush Women "galvanizes artists, activists, audiences and communities through performances, artist development, education and community engagement [...] to affect the overall ecology of the arts by promoting artistic legacies; projecting the voices of the under-heard and people of color; bringing attention to and addressing issues of equity in the dance field and throughout the United States." In addition to performances, UBW offers training for choreographers/dancers, community workshops, and a 10-day Summer Leadership Institute that connects dance professionals, community-based artists, and activists in a learning experience that leverages the arts as a vehicle for social activism and civic engagement.

We recently spoke with Jawole about the connections between Urban Bush Women's community-centered practice, organizational culture, and advocacy.

## **Can you tell us a little bit about UBW's community work?**

Urban Bush Women (UBW) has a very complex practice of education and community engagement that is centered on looking at how we enter community. We do this through our Entering, Building, and Exiting (EBX) workshops, which provide participants with tools and methodologies for entering, building, and exiting community, including navigating a variety of assumptions regarding community-based practices. As facilitators, we do not come in as experts; we are there to be in engagement with people. Tied into this value of community engagement are UBW's values around anti-racism work, which developed out of our work with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB, a New Orleans-based organization that does anti-racism

training). We started working with PISAB in 1992. When we first started working with PISAB, people remarked: "This is a dance company, why are you all doing this [anti-racism work]?" People didn't get it. Fast forward many years later, we are still partnering with PISAB and anti-racism is the foundation of our work. All EBX dancers go through PISAB and EBX trainings, and PISAB training has become a core part of our Summer Leadership Institute.

The Summer Leadership Institute first formed in 1997 as the Summer Dance Institute. I knew immediately we had to bring in PISAB as partners. When we moved the program to New York and focused on community building through the arts, one of our long-term team members said, "What you are really doing is leadership training, not just dance." I had never really defined what we were doing, but this felt right so we changed the name.

Not only is anti-racism and leadership work foundational to who we are in community, but this work also is foundational to how we are on stage! Our anti-racism values, framework, and practice helps us examine the assumptions we carry and stories we are programmed to tell. These trainings help UBW dancers find depth. That's one thing people really tune into—the depth of Urban Bush Women.

## ***You mentioned that UBW is working to ensure that its core values are aligned with its artistic work as well as its administrative practices. How are you doing that?***

This is what we are in the middle of doing right now – moving from an office culture that is about getting office tasks done to a culture that reflects UBW as a learning and creative organization. Often artists and administrators within an organization are considered separately. How can we bring lessons from dance – how it feels to be in your body, what fear feels like, what learning feels like – into our administrative work? Organizations need to see themselves as a community and think about the ways in which employees enter that community. Are community values stated or assumed? We, as an organization, are getting better at asking these questions and have a lot to share with others about what we're learning.

## ***The work that you do may not be 'advocacy' in a traditional sense, but it's connected. How do you see UBW doing advocacy work?***

To build an anti-racist organization and culture: that is our advocacy work. It's no small matter. Our dance, our leadership, and our advocacy work all feed each other. [These intersections] are especially important in the time we are currently living in. The best of art brings our humanity to the surface, which is why [those in power] are always trying to squash the arts in times of rising hate. UBW's artistic practice and work to create an anti-racist, organizational culture that promotes creative leaders in community are its advocacy.

*Photo provided by Jawole, photographer Crush Boone*