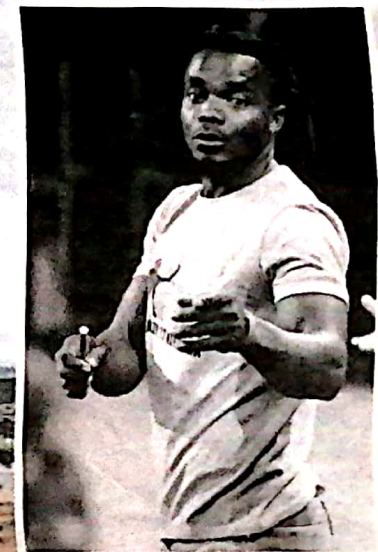


Instilling confidence through dance



West Dance Academy offers mobile training in and around the Havana community.

❖ Staying true to the roots of the art

West Dance Academy in Havana is a safe place for many children to explore their talents while learning discipline.

ESTER KAMATI

Located in Havana, Katutura, West Dance Academy is aimed at retaining the unique styles of dance found only in the Katutura informal settlement. It is headed by West Uarije, better known as the 'African Black Cat', who has over 16 years of dancing experience. West emphasises the need for young attendees to value themselves as artists to avoid being exploited.

Starting out, West was not

trying to find sponsors but rather worked with what he had, searched for his own space and asked for assistance only from friends and family. He shared that he wanted his own space, where he could explore his own energy and spirit.

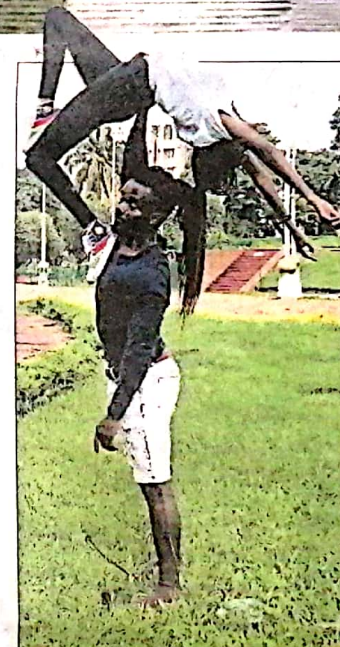
"If you are hardworking, money will fall in your hands," he says, adding that the pursuit for money should not be the only thing driving you.

West Dance Academy offers mobile training in and around the Havana community as well as house lessons for those who would like to be trained at home. On average, about 47 students attend the academy daily, on a rotational basis to ensure that there aren't too many people in the facility at once.

There are plans to pull off a dance showcase later this year, where West aims to teach the children the storytelling nature of the art of dance.

"Dance is a book that you can read, start to end," he says, explaining the evolution of the art. West started dancing when he was in grade two. He would perform cultural dances around the fire for his grandmother, which made her extremely happy. He then realised that if he could make his grandmother happy through dance, he could bring the same joy to the faces of others through this art.

Initially dance was only something playful to him, until he was asked to perform at the school assembly and other school functions. In 2000, West was able to earn some money from his



West Uarije, better known as the 'African Black Cat', who has over 16 years of dancing experience.

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

dancing, which he used to pay for his studies. In 2004, he failed grade 10 and joined the music group 'Bullet' as a dancer and choreographer and eventually left in 2007 and joined OYO in 2010. In between, he danced with various dance academies and was even part of the team which choreographed the dance at the president's inauguration this year.

West is passionate about instilling confidence in young dancers from Katutura who do not take themselves seriously enough to audition for gigs. His goal is to link them to opportunities and place them in a position to thrive.

He believes in the buy and sell concept. He says he needs to not just sell his services to the community but also help out as much as he can. He distributes clothes donated by friends and family to the children, among other initiatives.