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## Sarah Mills

Linda J. Hanes

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# *Dancer* becomes vehicle for social change in Panama by Linda Hanes

Orphanages in Panama are overflowing with kids wishing they had homes and a loving family, and often there's an unmet need for a creative outlet for these at-risk children. One WMU student spent her summer to help rectify that situation through teaching orphaned children about expression through movement.

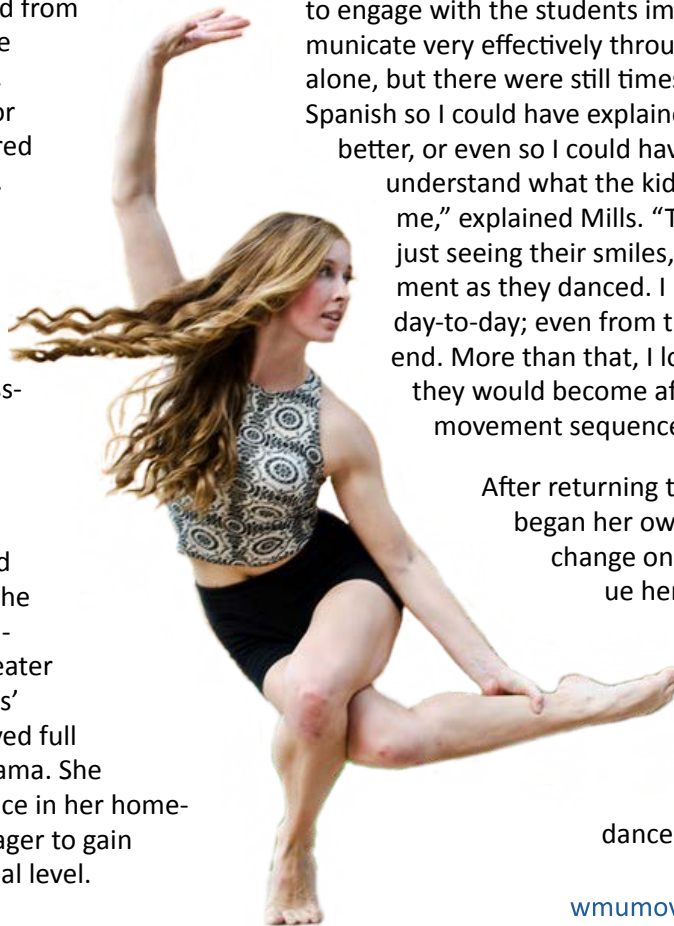
Sarah Mills, a senior planning to graduate in the spring of 2016 with a major in dance and a minor in nonprofit leadership, recently returned from a volunteer trip abroad teaching dance at various orphanages across Panama. The trip originally started as an idea for a class project in which she was required to write a grant proposal for a project. She wrote a grant proposal based on the work of the nonprofit, Movement Exchange. The organization's mission is to use dance as a vehicle for social change—locally and internationally—while fostering civic engagement, cross-cultural understanding, and creative expression.

Mill's teacher in the dance management class, Megan Slayter, encouraged Mills to submit the grant proposal to the Kalamazoo Artistic Development Initiative—KADI—of the Arts Council of Greater Kalamazoo. Much to her surprise, Mills' proposal was approved and she received full funding to teach dance abroad in Panama. She already had experienced teaching dance in her hometown of Warsaw, Ind., but Mills was eager to gain experience teaching on an international level.

Sarah arrived at WMU in the fall of 2012 with big dreams of seeing the world and making a difference. "Over the last few years, I've had an increasing urge to travel abroad to experience dance in another country, whether teaching a class or taking one," Mills said. "Because dance is a universal language, I feel there is an automatic connection to each and every culture through movement.

Mills was not proficient in Spanish when she arrived in Panama, but despite the language barrier, she was able to engage with the students immediately. "I could communicate very effectively through movement and dance alone, but there were still times I wish I was able to speak Spanish so I could have explained movements or ideas better, or even so I could have been able to more fully understand what the kids and teens were saying to me," explained Mills. "The most rewarding thing was just seeing their smiles, their joy, and their enjoyment as they danced. I loved seeing them improve day-to-day; even from the beginning of a day to the end. More than that, I loved watching how proud they would become after accomplishing a difficult movement sequence."

After returning to the United States, Mills began her own chapter of Movement Exchange on Western's campus to continue her outreach through dance to Kalamazoo area residents and students. She says anyone interested in dance or nonprofit work is welcome to join, even if they are not a student of dance. Contact Mills at :



[wmumovementexchange@gmail.com](mailto:wmumovementexchange@gmail.com)