It started in a converted garage.

Twelve youths and two directors, passionate about dance, wanted to make a difference.

Three years later, transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project -- a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring youths through dance, creative writing and theater -- operates on a $150,000 annual budget and has its own studio.

"It started very grass-roots," said Cat Corral, executive director, who co-founded the nonprofit with Julius Capuchino. "It's been an incredible journey. As I stand in our new space, it feels like, 'Pinch me -- is it real?'"

Holding the reins are students, mostly teens from Hoover and Crawford high schools. They create one original production annually, based around a community issue such as hunger or immigration, that tours throughout the county.

"It's important that it's youth-driven in every aspect," Corral said. "They write the script and do the choreography. It stems from their own ideas."

Students audition to be part of the performing group, which meets about 15 hours each week for dance training, rehearsals and community outreach.

"There's also leadership training and facilitated dialogues with guest educators on local community issues," said Corral, 34. "It's a rigorous program. Some of the kids have absolutely zero dance training, but all have an enjoyment of dance."

After that it's show time, with the students performing at professional theaters, middle and high schools and community events.

At a recent rehearsal in the auditorium at Hoover High School, La Mesa resident Victoria Olango, 20, studied choreography for an upcoming dance benefit. Olango was part of transcenDANCE's inaugural troupe while she was a senior at Hoover.

"It was the first time I'd been given the opportunity to just train," she said. "I was interested in the loving environment that was offered. There's definitely a sense of home, of family, with transcenDANCE."

Olanglo followed the beat of the West African music, pounding her feet on the floor and
reaching toward the ceiling.

She's a different person because of the program, she said. She's happier, and not so serious. She handles life's challenges with a bit more perspective.

"It helps with balance in my life," Olango said. "There's school and work and career and different demands, and dance is just my release. It's my outlet."

Nearby, Rodrigo Jimenez, 17, a senior at Hoover High School, stretched onstage.

"Going through transcenDANCE, my eyes have opened," said Rodrigo, who joined the program in his sophomore year. "My heart has opened. I accept that there are certain things that I don't like about my community. But there is so much joy, and so much fruit in my community, and transcenDANCE has helped me see that."

Rodrigo lost his mother as a child.

"I was able to dance through it," he said. "That has made me what I am. All of this energy, and passion, and need to do something for myself and the people around me, is fulfilled through transcenDANCE."

Because of his training and leadership experience, Jimenez recently secured an internship with Jean Isaacs San Diego Dance Theater, a professional company.

"Not until recently did I ever consider myself a dancer," Rodrigo said, smiling.

The program is free for students. Their costumes, shoes and training are covered by donations.

"Our kids are from City Heights," Corral said. "City Heights faces a lower socioeconomic environment, a high percentage of single-parent households, with most of them around the poverty line.

"A lot of the youth are helping to raise younger siblings. They're having to financially cover expenses like prom, yearbooks, scholarship application fees. They take on a lot of personal responsibility in addition to school and home life."

Most of the funding for the nonprofit comes from individual donors and grants.

"We're standing for a larger cause," Olango said. "There's so much more involved than just dancing. It's not just putting technique and choreography together to some random music. We're working for social change.

"The work we do reaches people. The work we do touches people. The struggles we're going through, others are going through, and we use art to tell people, 'Hey, don't forget, you're not alone.' " 
Inspiration through dance

What: transcenDANCE Youth Arts Project

Information: (619) 255-3812

Online: tdarts.org

U-T Multimedia: To see a video of a recent transcenDANCE rehearsal, go to uniontrib.com/more/tdarts

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