

hile heart transplants and high blood pressure may not seem to have a logical connection to dance, they are among the subjects that inspire Monroeville choreographer Maria Caruso. Caruso, founder and director of

Bodiography Contemporary Ballet, has been able to successfully combine her passion for dance with her interest in science and medicine to create choreography that is bold yet accessible. "Our primary focus is to utilize dance as a way to identify with the human condition," said Caruso, who did that with her first ballet, "Heart (Function vs. Emotion)," which premiered in 2010 with an original score by Cello Fury. The ballet was a reflection of her experience working with heart transplant patients and patients with pulmonary arterial hypertension. Caruso actually observed open heart surgeries and shadowed doctors at the UPMC Advanced Heart Failure Program. She worked with Dr. Dennis McNamara, a cardiologist, and Dr. Robert Kormos, a cardiac surgeon.

"Had they not supported my very first ballet, "Heart," I really wouldn't be where I am right now," Caruso said. "It wasn't until Dr. McNamara approached me in 2009 that I realized I had an amazing opportunity to do something on a broader scale. She even incorporated Dr. Kormos into the ballet. "I wanted a surgeon to be on stage... to emulate the hands of a surgeon during surgery. I thought they were extremely beautiful."

"I have always been interested in medicine since I was a young girl," Caruso said. "Dance was always a passion of mine, an art form in which I was offered a tremendous amount of opportunity."

Earlier this year, Caruso's company debuted "108 Minutes," an ode to regenerative medicine. Dr. Kormos had encouraged her to meet with Dr. Alan Russell at the McGowan Institute of Regenerative Medicine to conduct research for the new ballet she wanted to produce. "I worked with five of the scientists at the institute and had the opportunity to interview them and learn about the science, and I created a full-length ballet about regenerative medicine and how we're utilizing it right now to heal our wounded soldiers," Caruso said.

While still in high school, Caruso began taking classes for college credit at La Roche College. By

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her senior year of high school, she was also working to complete her first year of college. She graduated from high school at 16, attended La Roche full time and then transferred to Florida State University as a sophomore.

She graduated with a BFA in dance at the age of 19, moved to New York City and founded Bodiography in 2000. A year later, she had moved back to Pittsburgh and started a local version of her New York company, operating both before letting the New York branch go. In 2001, she went to graduate school at Carlow University, where she earned a Master of Science degree in professional leadership and management for nonprofit organizations. Caruso has conducted master classes at Point Park University, West Virginia University, Slippery Rock University and DeSales University, and has also designed movement programs for The Yeshiva Girls School of Pittsburgh, Shaler Area School District and Carnegie Mellon University's Cyert Center.

"My parents had encouraged me to come back to Pittsburgh in hopes that I would assist in bringing youth back to Pittsburgh," Caruso said. She fell in love with Pittsburgh again and wanted to make it her home. She then opened up a dance conservatory in Squirrel Hill (located in Gene Kelly's first dance studio) -Bodiography Center for Movement. "It was a name I thought would celebrate the geography of the body." The center celebrates health and wellness as part of the arts, while the concept of the dance company is to encourage numerous body types, not just the typical ballet body. "Artistically, I have an amazing company of artists who really do exemplify the beauty of diversity in dance, physically, emotionally and technically," Caruso said.

The choreographer recently returned from a trip to Haiti during which she had the opportunity to visit the Albert Schweitzer hospital. "I could see such a great sense of spirit in each patient I visited. I didn't pass one child who didn't smile back at me, despite their circumstances."

During her visit, Caruso was hosted by Ian Rawson, the hospital's managing director and his wife, Lucy. "In Haiti I had a strong desire to try to think about how to use my art form to create a ballet that would assist in raising resources and increase visibility for the [Albert



Schweitzer] hospital. I have great admiration for those doctors and nurses, the volunteers, the people that I met at the hospital. I had great admiration for their commitment and strength in actively making a difference in the lives of those less fortunate."

In February, Caruso and Bodiography will mark its 10th anniversary with the "Red Carpet Roll Out Celebration" at the Byham Theater, an event that will showcase a decade of Caruso's choreography.

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