

TAKE 5

Following Her Dream

Tina Blaine never misses a beat.

By Gina Jaber

Tina Blaine is executive director of Rhythmix Cultural Works, the Blanding Street community arts nonprofit that brings music, dance, theater, exhibits, and arts education together. Known best as “Bean,” she is committed to promoting musical and cultural arts as an essential element to the community and beyond. Energetic, a world traveler, and a just little bit nutty, Blaine is also a talented percussionist and dancer.

After working at and growing Rhythmix Cultural Works for nine years, what are you most proud of?

I’m really proud that, through our Performance, Art & Learning program, PAL, we’ve been able to provide thousands of young people with the opportunity to experience free live cultural arts performances. The program draws about 200 students per assembly, mostly second- through fifth-graders, at no cost to the kids or the schools. With the world in so much disarray, we believe it is more important than ever to expose young people to different cultures and create opportunities for nurturing respect and appreciation. I was surprised to learn that more than 50 languages are spoken on our island, and I think it’s important to create a sense of cultural pride for everyone. PAL offers an age-appropriate way for children to begin to learn about some of the places where their classmates come from. I am also honored to be part of an artist-run organization that supports other artists in presenting their work, whether it’s music, dance, visual art, or performance.

As an accomplished percussionist, what advice do you have for aspiring musical artists like you?

Follow your dreams. Even though it is challenging to make your living as an artist, if you love what you do and continue to make it a priority, you will find a way to share your talents and passion with others. I won’t pretend that it is an easy route, but don’t sell yourself short, and do find other ways to support yourself without giving up on what you really want to do. I teach and run our art center, and I still find a way to make time to practice and perform. I’ve had to reinvent myself many times to hold on to what I want to do. It’s not easy to make your living as a musician, but if you stay committed you will figure out how to do it; you just will.



What’s new and exciting happening at Rhythmix these days?

We are currently in rehearsals for an ambitious public art project called *Island City Waterways* that will celebrate the unique history and character of being an island city. Audiences will get to experience and participate in live music, dance, theater, and visual art as they journey with the artists on a half-mile walking tour along the city’s historic waterfront trail between the Fruitvale and Park Street bridges. The event takes place May 20–22, and it’s completely free, thanks to the generous support of many wonderful foundations and sponsors. It’s the biggest project we’ve taken on to date, and I can’t wait for audiences from around the Bay Area to step back in time to learn about the history of our island through the arts. We are also about halfway through our first classical music series, and we’ve recently begun offering several music history classes on everything from the Beatles to the inspiration behind some of the great composers, in addition to regular favorites like our bimonthly Café Flamenco and kids programming. We always have something new and exciting going on.

Your dream for Rhythmix?

To continue to grow and become a well-established, financially sustainable cultural institution that helps raise visibility and participation in the arts in new and interesting ways. Some of our specific goals include exploring options for additional real estate as we start to experience some growing pains in our space, as

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well as continuing to inspire kids of all ages to become interested in the arts and to get on the radar of more Alamedans. Ironically, we draw audiences from all over the Bay Area—from the city and the East Bay all the way up to Vallejo and down to San Jose—but we still hear from too many people in our own hometown that they don’t know us. We want that to change.

Of all of the places you’ve lived and visited in the world, did you ever imagine you’d end up in Alameda, California?

It is funny to realize that all my travels, musical studies, performances, research, teaching, and more have led me here. I’ve always loved the Bay Area, and I really enjoy living and working in Alameda. It is wonderful to work with so many talented people who inspire each other every day. Rhythmix affords me the opportunity to share my connections, which is very exciting. I also love the strong, diverse network that we have. My life now is quite different than when I was traveling in Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, teaching at Carnegie Mellon, or developing museum exhibits at a think tank in Palo Alto. But the musical continuity of my experiences makes them all related. I feel very lucky to be part of the Alameda community and to share my love for the arts—plus I have the best commute I’ve ever had.

Photo by Chris Duffey