

Once on Food Stamps, Now He's a 'Genius'

Dancer and MacArthur fellow Kyle Abraham talks to The Root about how his life story informs his work.

BY: LYNETTE HOLLOWAY

Posted: Oct. 8 2013 12:47 AM

(*The Root*) -- The other day during a recent business trip to Los Angeles, Kyle Abraham's rental car got a flat tire. For most people, this inconvenience would spin their day out of control, but not Abraham.

The dancer-choreographer was still floating on air after being named a MacArthur fellow. The **2013 fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation** includes \$625,000 that is paid over five years.

He is one of three African Americans to win the so-called genius grant this year. The other two are Tarell Alvin McCraney, a Chicago playwright, and Carrie Mae Weems of Syracuse, N.Y.

"It's still really sinking in," Abraham told *The Root*, after pulling to the side of the road to take the call. "I experienced a wave of emotions when I got the phone call about the award. I just started crying. I cry every time I read a congratulatory Facebook message. It's just so overwhelming."

It is overwhelming because his story is simply awe-inspiring. He once scraped by on food stamps and was wondering **how to pay off student loans** before the call came. Indeed, his fortune was catapulted by a deep dedication to dance and tightly choreographed moves. He is founder and artistic director of **Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion**.

"When I first started dancing, I knew I was interested in choreography," said the 36-year-old Brooklyn, N.Y., resident. He grew up on the hardscrabble streets of Pittsburgh, Pa., and hails from a close-knit, working-class family. His father passed away in 2001; he maintains close ties with his mother and sister.

Currently he is preparing for a gala fundraiser Oct. 20 at New York Live Arts and practicing for a performance at **TEDx Talk** at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art Oct. 19.

Abraham says that he plans to use the award to develop his company, hire staff and put on productions. One piece he's working on is *When the Wolves Came In*, a historical homage to his personal history and that of his company.

His formative years in Philadelphia informed his award-winning work **Pavement**, which explores violence through dance. The work, he says, was inspired in part by John Singleton's film *Boyz N the Hood*, which was released when Abraham was in the ninth grade at Schenley High School in the historic Hill District of Pittsburgh.

As his [website](#) describes it, "Reimagined as a dance work and now set in Pittsburgh's historically black neighborhoods, Homewood and the Hill District, *Pavement* aims to create a strong emotional chronology of a culture conflicted with a history plagued by discrimination, genocide, and a constant quest for a lottery ticket weighted in freedom."

In the 1950s, both neighborhoods experienced cultural shifts, he explains on the website. That is when jazz legends like Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington performed at local theaters and where Billy Strayhorn spent most of his teenage years.

"Over a century later, those same theaters are now dilapidated," Abraham writes. "And the streets that once strived on family run businesses and a thriving jazz scene now show the sad effects of gang violence and crack cocaine."

Another work from 2010, [**The Radio Show**](#), juxtaposes his feelings of loss as he witnesses his father's decline due to Alzheimer's alongside the abrupt closure of a beloved urban-radio station that had been an important part of the community.

Abraham received a bachelor's degree from the State University of New York at Purchase and a master's from New York University. His choreographic works have been performed by both his company, Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, the Joyce Theatre, Harlem Stage, Danspace Project, On the Boards, the Kelly-Strahorn Theater and REDCAT, among many others, according to [the MacArthur Foundation](#).

Besides the MacArthur fellowship, Abraham has received the prestigious Bessie Award for outstanding performance in dance for his work in *The Radio Show*, and a Princess Grace Award for choreography in 2010. The previous year he was selected as one of Dance Magazine's 25 to Watch for 2009 and received a Jerome Travel and Study Grant in 2008.

Abraham began his dance training at the Civic Light Opera Academy and the Creative and Performing Arts High School in Pittsburgh after encouragement from friends, he said. "I used to go to raves and other social dance events, and people used to encourage me to take dance lessons," he recalled. "After getting a role in a high school play, I started to take lessons. I'm glad I listened, because things just keep getting better."

http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2013/10/macarthur_fellow_kyle_abraham_interview_once_on_food_stamps_now_hes_a_genius.html