

CANVAS **REBEL**



STORIES & INSIGHTS

Meet Genie Benson



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We're excited to introduce you to the always interesting and insightful Genie Benson. We hope you'll enjoy our conversation with Genie below.

Genie, thanks for joining us, excited to have you contributing your stories and insights. Can you talk to us about a project that's meant a lot to you?

I have several meaningful projects that I have worked on. 1. I am the Executive Director of a non-profit called Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble which is a Los Angeles based Israeli dance company that celebrates the spirit of Jewish/Israeli culture www.kcdancers.org

2. I am the Executive Director of TEEV Events which brings Israeli artists to the diaspora to celebrate Israeli culture. We also produce major events, bringing our talents and artists to elevate the content of productions. www.teev.com

3. I am a co-producer for our latest non-profit called Arts For Change. www.artsforchange.world Our first production is called SURVIVORS. More info about these following...



Awesome – so before we get into the rest of our questions, can you briefly introduce yourself to our readers.

- Being the daughter of two Holocaust (1939-1945) survivors, my childhood (I was born in 1949) was different from my friends. My parents taught my sister, brother, and I to be independent. That included cooking, cleaning, sewing, working, and developing all skills that would prepare us to deal with any situation. My mother’s life was saved by “working” in the concentration camps.
- They made sure we were busy and challenged... from Girl Scouts to ballet five days a week. Professional ballet training and performing in my early years eventually led me to other types of dance. I was reluctantly sent to Camp Alonim (in later years I couldn’t wait to go) where I was exposed to Israeli dance by my mentor Dani Dassa. Israeli dance and further exposure to Jewish culture is what started my connection to Israel. I began attending Israeli dance sessions as part of my regular schedule. I also began to connect to the singers from Israel. I eventually took my first trip to Israel at 18 where I lived with my remaining relatives post WWII and fell in love with the country and the culture.
- With all my “hobbies”, my parents wanted me to have a career to be able to support myself. My father had been a dentist in Europe before the war. When he came to the US, he

could not get a license so he switched to selling dental supplies. When I was 16, he got me a summer job in a dental office at one of his clients. He asked the dentist to let me work there for the summer and to pay my salary. What I didn't know for many years was that my parents were actually paying the dentist my salary in secret. His plan worked; I decided I liked working in a dental office but that I wanted to be a hygienist and not an assistant. So I went to dental school which provided me with a flexible, part-time good paying job that allowed me to earn a living as well as have all my "other" jobs.

- This led me to join an Israeli dance performing company, the Keshet Chaim (Rainbow of Life) Dance Ensemble, founded by Artistic Director, Eytan Avisar. I began as a dancer, then became managing director and am now the Executive Director. I created a non-profit, learned to apply for grants and started fundraising. We moved the company from one that entertained at events to a touring professional company. I wanted to connect young and older American audiences to Israel's culture. The company is now 40 years old and during that time we have collaborated with many artists from Israel including singers, bands, musicians, choreographers, and composers. In addition to performing, Keshet Chaim created a comprehensive education department which works with schools, teaching about the culture of Israel through dance and theater. We have many letters from students after our projects that are very touching and let us know that we are making a difference.

- Thirty years ago, I connected with David Azulay at TEEV events, which brings Israeli performing artists to tour the US. TEEV continues to work with many Israeli artists in addition to producing many varied events. As the Executive Producer, I strengthened my connection to Israel and developed relationships while working with many organizations on their events.

- In 2012 my family accompanied my mother to Poland on the March of the Living, a once-a-year trip for high school students to hear survivors' stories from where it all happened. This made the Holocaust "real" for me, and led to the realization and commitment of our family to continue my parent's legacy by telling their stories. I am proud to say that my mother has been accompanied by one or both of my sons on this journey every year since then, until her passing last year. She will forever be an inspiration to those of us who have internalized and continue to teach "Never Forget, Never Again..."

- A year and a half ago I re-connected with a friend from High School and college, writer/producer Wendy Kout. Her creative path led to television, film, and theatre. In 2017, Wendy was commissioned to write SURVIVORS, a Holocaust and tolerance teaching play to tour schools in New York. The play now has five stage and school touring productions across the U.S and Canada. After reading Wendy's Facebook post about her play I called her. We discovered we shared the same mission and soon created Arts for Change, a non-profit company to tour SURVIVORS on the West Coast. The timing was critical as my mother's health was failing and she was no longer able to continue her rigorous schedule as a Holocaust education activist. The West Coast Tour, with our diverse young cast, has opened thousands of young and older hearts and minds and is honored to be partnered with Holocaust Museum LA and the Holocaust Education Center of StandWithUs. We are also honored that the Museum of Tolerance presented our Los Angeles public premiere and that we were invited to perform at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. 2024 is already

filling with school and stage performances from San Diego to Seattle. We are so grateful to our cast, crew, partners, donors, sponsors, and supporters who make our work possible.



What do you think is the goal or mission that drives your creative journey?

- I am deeply committed to Keshet Chaim, TEEV and Arts For Change. Though separate companies, they share the same mission as I do, to produce Jewish and Israeli performance art for multi-cultural and multi-generational audiences. My challenging creative work is a blessing. As is my beautiful family. And through them both, the blessed memory, lessons, and legacy of my parents live on.



Can you share a story from your journey that illustrates your resilience?

When I decided to take Keshet Chaim from an entertainment group to a non-profit organization, I had a lot to teach myself. I enrolled in many classes and started to understand the process. After becoming a non-profit it was time to start writing grants. My first LA City grant was a huge task. Back in those days nothing was digital. After completing the 40 page application that was produced on a typewriter, I finally turned in the grant. With my inexperience I chose Beverly Hills High as my venue for the project. It was cheap and centrally located. The entire grant was thrown out because Beverly Hills is not in the City of Los Angeles. No changes allowed!!

So for my next grant I went up to someone in the dance world that I noticed was always getting funded and I asked him if I could pay him to write my next grant for the California Arts Council. He said I am not a professional grant writer; only for my company. But he was intrigued. He didn't think our "folk" company was that good, but he agreed to come to an upcoming performance. As he saw the reaction from the cheering audience, he understood what we were all about.. He wrote an essay entitled "Israeli Dance – an emerging art form" and included it in the application. Extra pages in the application were not allowed, but he knew everyone and they accepted it from him. We were funded. For my next grant I went to my friend again and said, "how about if I write the next grant and pay you to review it?". He agreed and after reading my next proposal he said to me "can I pay you to write my next grant?". And that is how I learned.



Contact Info:

- **Website:** www.kcdancers.org www.artsforchange.world www.teev.com