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# Hurricane Maria Destroyed Her Studio, Then Covid-19 Shuttered Her Dream Space, but Thalema Williams Pushed on and is Now Expanding Her Dance Business to Florida

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Donna Bellot **September 10, 2020**

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**A collage of dance choreography by Thalema Williams By. TSW**

Dance has long been a form of creative expression. No matter the type, whether ballet or hip-hop, ballroom or contemporary, the art of dancing is both aesthetically pleasing and can be symbolic of a people and their cultures. And for Thalema Williams, the creative expression and artistry of dance has always been a part of her life. So much so that in 2016 she opened a dance studio in the Virgin Islands. Now, despite drawbacks caused by Hurricane's Irma and Maria in 2017 and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, Ms. Williams is expanding her studio to Florida.

Born and raised on the island of St Croix, Ms. Williams began dancing at the age of five. She studied various forms of dancing, including jazz, cultural, ballet, tap, and hip-hop—to name a few. Throughout her lifetime she has been a dancer and performer, a cheerleader, and she has even performed as a Disney Character Parade Performer. Ms. Williams has trained as a dance instructor in California, Virginia, and Maryland—for over 15 years—and continues to train throughout the United States.

But in 2016 Ms. Williams decided to move back to the Virgin Islands to open her own dance studio—Thalema Williams Studios (TWS). There, she hoped to give the opportunity and experience of dance to the youth of her home island of St. Croix, because she says she didn't realize the opportunities that existed until she left for college.

“I wanted to build that foundation [for the youth of St. Croix] ... When I was growing up I didn't realize that there were so many opportunities in dance, and art, and music, and everything ...but we didn't have that outlet, that opportunity...” said Ms. Williams.

She started small, opening a TWS in September of 2016 where she held classes in a space that was donated by former owner of Centerline Bakery, Josephat John — in Hannah's Rest. There, she built and grew her studio until she was able to find a more permanent location. By August of 2017, Ms. Williams had moved TWS to LaReine Shopping Center where she spent roughly \$60,000 in repairs to modernize and expand the space. However, just two weeks after the grand opening of TWS's new location, Hurricane Maria destroyed the newly renovated studio.

Still determined to keep operations going, Ms. Williams temporarily operated TWS out of the Estate Bethlehem Plantation, where she spent about 8 months. Her goal, however, had always been to find a permanent location.

That location would eventually be a 6,000 sq. ft. studio in Peter's Rest, located across from Napoleon's Pizza. And for almost two years that space in Peter's Rest was the home of TWS—until the coronavirus pandemic hit. Because of social distancing guidelines; the territory's closing of what are considered nonessential businesses; and the rising cost of rent, Ms. Williams had to give up the space she thought was her studio's forever-home in July 2020.

Unfortunately, losing that perfect location due to Covid-19 also meant that the students of TWS were unable to perform the Lion King recital that they had worked so hard for. It also meant that their annual trip to perform in Florida would have to be canceled. Despite this, Ms. Williams says she doesn't want to dwell on the negative aspects of her journey. “I don't like to be like a downer on situations, you know? We've been pushing forward and everything like that,” she said.

That positive attitude has paid off. It is now September 2020, and she is not only [restarting operations on St Croix](#), but she is [expanding her studio to Florida](#). Ms. Williams said the opportunity to expand to Florida came through a college coach who reached out to her after seeing everything that she had accomplished with the youth of the VI.

“She wrote me and asked me if I would like the opportunity to basically house my studio that I have on St. Croix and use her space,” said Ms. Williams. Ms. Williams says although she already has people signing up and could open TWS's Florida doors, she wants to prepare for the kids and make sure she has everything in place.

TWS's St. Croix operation has already started classes, this time at the Beeston Hill Gym. She describes the classes as being private sessions limited to 4 to 6 students per class. The students will also be 10ft apart to keep in compliance with social distancing guidelines. The St. Croix

operation is also offering virtual sessions for those who want to learn but are unable to make it to the classroom.

When asked what advice she would give to others facing hardships in pursuing business ventures, Ms. Williams said, "Never give up!"

"Just continue believing in your passion, your dream. Remember why you first started your business. As a small business owner, sometimes we feel defeated in certain situations..., but I'm just feeling so blessed to have family and friends that are continuously by my side, continuously supporting me, I just keep pushing forward..."

"I know that when one door shuts something else is going to open, that's what you have to remember... I just know for me if I had stopped at any point from the hurricane to the COVID situation, I don't know what I would do."

For Ms. Williams, the ultimate goal is to eventually find a more permanent space for TWS. In the meantime, she is doing what she can to help the kids retain what she describes as a sense of normalcy by offering them the opportunity to continue learning the expressiveness and artistry that comes through dancing.

Contact Ms. Williams at 340-626-6768, or through her company's website [here](#).