Christchurch has endured its share of hardship, but its spirit is unbroken. No more so than its vibrant hip hop scene - and Elly Hanssen, artistic director of SWARM, is working hard to make it bigger.

Originally from Australia, Elly began her hip hop dance training in Sydney before moving to Atlanta, Georgia, joining Culture Shock, a crew of about 35 dancers. It proved a great network to get into the industry.

“I started doing a few free gigs and then began working professionally as a back-up dancer for a variety of artists such as singers and rappers over a four and a half year period. There were a lot of different events going on so they are always looking for dancers. You basically sign up with an agency and then they get you work – it’s really fun.”

SWARM creative collaboration was formed in Christchurch. There are 12 in the team including dancers, a graffiti artist, a producer and vocalists. Elly and her husband are the directors – she dances and sings, he MCs.

Christchurch has a small audience but they make the most of it doing anything from corporate events to parties, adding more dancers for big events. “There is not a massive music and dance industry to be involved in, so we do what we can. It’s mostly creating opportunities for others.”

They opened their Moorhouse Dance Studio (MDS) last year; the earthquakes having destroyed their original studio in the city, along with others. “We found that 2011 was a bit of a write off. Everyone was just like ‘what do we do?’ I think building something fresh has been really helpful.”

They have about 45 students with about 10 – 15 casuals coming through. “You can see the dancers really developing more of a passion to take it seriously.” At the end of each term they produce shows, which have proved very popular, with just under 500 people attending.

Elly says there is a definite lack of opportunity in Christchurch for talented dancers; so travelling to Auckland or America is a big attraction. “But even in Auckland there are mostly just crews. As an individual dancer you have got to either audition and join a crew or just go up there to up-skill.”

SWARM’IN CHRISTCHURCH

By Francesca Horsley
She says her Atlanta style is mostly Groove and she has developed this with her dancers, but it has changed considerably. “When I first moved here I had more of that flavour I did back up dancing and this style has a lot of big movements – a lot of groove – very energetic. But it has become more intricate and stylistic over time.”

“I think a lot of competitions require intricacy and different tricks.” One of the inspirations is YouTube and Elly says her students hook into it all the time. “When I was in States you could get training from so many different places you didn’t really need to look to the internet because it was right there.”

When Elly first came here she judged the Street Dance New Zealand (SDNZ) competitions for three years. However taking part in the New Zealand competition scene can be problematic for Christchurch crews as the majority of competitions are in Auckland or Wellington.

“Christchurch doesn’t get that much attention in competitions. We have got a few crews but either they have to go to Nelson or other places to actually compete, especially since the earthquake. The comps choreography is really specific because you are required to meet a certain criteria.” Last year SWARM competed in Xplosion, a local Christchurch competition, coming first.

“Xplosion was SWARM’s first competition. It was fun, however I would rather work as a dancer than compete as a dancer. It costs a lot of money to enter competitions especially when you are here. To enter Street Dance New Zealand costs $8,000 because of the flights to Auckland and accommodation for a big team plus six or seven rental cars. I’d rather spend $8,000 on our own events and build the community here. So that is what we have done thus far. The negative side of that is that you don’t really get the exposure that competitions provide in New Zealand.”

New Zealand’s distance from the home of hip hop has an enormous influence on the scene. “There is a lot of hip hop out here – with the Pacific Island and Maori influences - but competition is the only vehicle to excel. In America there is more opportunity to be a hip hop artist. There are a lot more individual dancers auditioning and developing their own style. When I was there I never got involved in any kind of competition but mainly danced in the industry. Auditioning, putting together a dance, it is about you and your craft. Here it is often about the crew and the craft.”

SWARM have performed at local events such as the Christchurch earthquake concert Band Together (which was televised live), Christmas in the Park, Rhythm and Alps, Pacific Arts festivals, and The Body Festival, which has given the dancers great experience.

To aid teaching at her studio, Elly developed her own hip hop curriculum using the principles she learnt in ballet as a youngster. “Because I came from mostly ballet training which I did up until I was 18 years, when I began teaching hip hop I was like ‘man the dancers really need to learn some techniques’. So I have created a 30 – 40 minute curriculum which includes isolations, stretch, strengthening, footwork, posture and grooves.”

Elly has noticed that it has really helped the dancers as they get an overall perspective rather than learning it ad hoc. “The technique of the move is really important, understanding where it came from, the foundation of it. In ballet, if you can’t do a plié you can’t do anything.” She has put it to the test in her teaching and “my crew members have really developed into amazing dancers – so I know it works”.

Elly is looking forward to 2013 as MDS head up to Auckland in April to represent the South Island in SDNZ National Competition. MDS will enter in the mega crew section so be sure to look out for them.

For more information, go to www.facebook.com/moorhousedancestudio