Ariel Quinones has been dancing since age twelve. He graduated in 2004 from Hunter College, where he managed the dance company and majored in dance and Latin American Studies. He finished his MPA degree in 2014 and now manages programs at the West Harlem Development Corporation (WHDC). Last week, Ariel reflected on his dance, his career, and his experience in the Master's program in Public Administration (MPA) here at City College.

Ariel’s life after graduation consisted of volunteer gigs at arts organizations, occasional dance work, and odd jobs. At one organization, he got involved in administration. “That experience was fundamental,” he says. “I was exposed to programming, budgeting, outreach, fundraising, and human resources.” It taught him a lot about management, as well as what he didn’t know about management. He soon decided he wanted to go back to school, “I mean, how can you be competitive in the job market with just a dance degree?”

Ariel looked into grad school for two years before taking the plunge and joining the program at City College. He considered art management programs, but concluded that an MPA would open more doors because it teaches a broader set of skills. He chose City College over other schools because of its location, affordability, and course offerings.

He came to the MPA program “for a degree and experience,” but says he left with much more. He was happily surprised when he also found “a group of likeminded people” and full-time staff that “really want you to succeed.” Between the faculty and his cohort, Ariel felt supported and understood in a way that he hadn’t expected from a graduate program.

Talking to fellow students about their passions, like poverty alleviation and international relations, also broadened Ariel’s understanding of the public sector. “That was something really good about the MPA program,” says Ariel. “Everyone had a different background.” The cohort was also a mix of experienced professionals and students who came straight from their bachelor’s degree. This enriched the classroom experience, says Ariel, because “you learn from both sides.”

During his first year in the MPA program, Ariel introduced himself to WHDC’s executive director at an event and was invited to work at the organization as an unpaid intern. With his volunteer experience and his MPA skills, he helped put together a grant evaluation system that the organization still uses today. His success led to a paid, full-time position managing a grants portfolio with programs in the areas of education, workforce, affordable housing, and arts and culture.

When asked what we can always find on his desk, Ariel replied, “Charts and graphs!” He uses them to show how his program is doing and credits the MPA program’s communications class for teaching him how to put together effective visuals.

Ariel says “it pays off” for experienced professionals to pursue an MPA because the program’s focus on teamwork and practical skills helped him learn so much more than sporadically attending individual classes or workshops. “I was looking to change careers,” says Ariel, “and before I even graduated, I had a job offer.”

“His success doesn’t surprise me,” says MPA Director Mark Musell, “he was one of the hardest working students we ever had.”