

AUGUST 7, 2011

ARTS | NEW JERSEY

Alvin Ailey's Mission Inspires Dance Camp

By TAMMY LA GORCE

WHEN Nehprie Amenii of Brooklyn walked into Newark Arts High School for the first time this summer, she was prepared to be hit with what she called "full cannons of attitude."

Since then, she has been spending weekdays teaching creative communication to 11- to 14-year-olds as part of AileyCamp, a full-day summer program offered by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and financed, in Newark, entirely by the Prudential Foundation.

Two weeks into the camp, Ms. Amenii, 31, recalled, "I used humor" to counteract uncooperative attitudes. "Then all that hardness starts to fall off," she said, and the camp's mission, which is not just to teach dance but also to help

Newark youths, some with hard lives, get cultural training.

campers navigate adolescence, can take center stage.

The camp is free to its 96 participants, who were selected after personal interviews this spring from a pool of 250 candidates in Newark public schools. It will end Aug. 12 after a performance on Aug. 10 at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, intended mainly for campers' friends and families.

AileyCamp is new to Newark and to New Jersey. The program was introduced in 1989 in Kansas City, Mo., by the dance company in partnership with the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. By 1999, when Nasha Thomas-Schmitt of Maplewood became director of Ailey's Arts in Education program as well as national director of AileyCamp, it had spread to Manhattan, Chicago and Bridgeport, Conn. During Ms. Thomas-Schmitt's tenure, camps have been added in Atlanta; Kansas City, Kan.; Berkeley, Calif.; Boston; Chicago; Miami; and now Newark.

"This program is my baby," Ms. Thomas-Schmitt, 48, a former Alvin Ailey dancer, said during a news media tour of the camp in mid-July. "When we open a camp, we're looking for a part-

ner that can sustain us. Hopefully this is staying in Newark for a long time."

Stops along the way in the bustling high school, which was hosting two other summer programs for children at the time, included classes in ballet, jazz, modern dance, West African dance, percussion and personal development.

Seven instructors — all but one have experience teaching other Ailey Arts in Education programs — lead the classes. In West African dance, children traversed the dance floor flailing their arms and stamping their feet to live accompaniment on a djembe drum; in ballet, a pianist played through a series of ports de bras and leaps.

Not only did AileyCamp Newark get financial support from the Prudential Foundation, but it also received help from the high school, which donated its dance-ready spaces and classrooms, and from the performing arts center, which is providing its 514-seat Victoria Theater for the performance.

Despite the absence of professional dancers, that performance is likely to have plenty of Ailey flavor.

"One of the first things we did here is show the kids Ailey history," said Felicia Swoope, 42, of Brooklyn, the director of the Newark camp. "We showed them videos of Ailey performing and explained the reason why he created the company."

Alvin Ailey, who died in 1989, founded his troupe in 1958 to promote African-American cultural expression and American modern dance. AileyCamp welcomes children of all races.

Though dance experience is not a prerequisite for campers, several children applied to the program because of their interest in becoming professional dancers. By the end of camp, as many as a dozen may receive scholarships to dance with Ailey's Junior Division at the Ailey School this fall.

As for the camp, Ms. Swoope said there were no "real criteria for getting in."

"What we want them to understand most is that Ailey was a remarkable person, but he was also a person just like them," she said. "He created work from his own experience, and we encourage them to do that also."

That may be more of a challenge in Newark than at the other AileyCamp sites, Ms. Thomas-Schmitt said. Though it is the camp closest to her home in Maplewood, and the easiest for her to visit, "I was a little nervous when we started

here," she said.

As Ailey's Arts in Education director, she has led several residencies in Newark's public schools. "I knew about the negative hardships a lot of these young people are dealing with on a daily basis," she said. "We don't have as many daunting situations in other camps." Those include incarcerated parents and drug-addicted ones, as well as unsafe

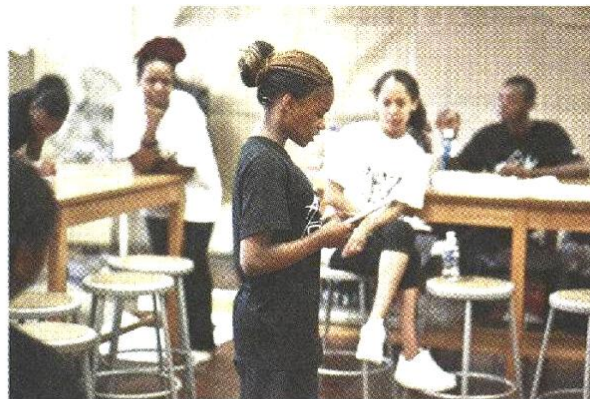
neighborhoods, she said.

"When we did our interviews for this camp," Ms. Thomas-Schmitt said, "one of our questions was, 'If you could change something in your life, what would it be?' Ninety percent said, 'Where I live.'"

By the end of camp, they may feel differently about that. As part of Ms. Amenii's creative communication class,



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GRACE Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, top right, national director of AileyCamp, in Newark. A student, left, reads her poem in creative communications class.

campers are taking pictures of their neighborhoods and writing poems about them; the poems will accompany a show of the photographs as part of the performance.

"When I think about them getting up on that stage, how important it makes them feel, it makes me teary-eyed," Ms. Amenii said. "It will be one of the biggest moments of their lives."

By mid-July, some campers were already showing signs that the camp had been an enriching experience. "What they want us to remember is that all kids can dance, and no one is special or more important than anyone else," said Briana Thomas, an 11-year-old from Newark who will enter Newark Early College High School as a sixth-grader in the fall. "I used to catch an attitude, but not so much anymore. It takes two to argue, and I have to think about being responsible for myself."

"I learned that from AileyCamp," she said.