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Dancing with the Stars

By: Lauren Lumpkin

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Alvin Ailey company features six local children at the Kennedy Center in its signature work

BY LAUREN LUMPKIN

The dancers emerged onto the blue-lit stage wearing all white. In rows of two — their hands clasped — they slid across the theater floor, threw their arms above their heads and twirled.

In front of them, 2,000 people sat in red velvet seats at the Kennedy Center's Opera House. But the dancers remained poised — not even the raucous cheering that echoed through the theater could melt the stern looks from the dancers' faces.

And by the time they finished, it was almost their bedtime.

Six children — 9-year-olds Ashley Bercian, Ty Miller and Kinley Guiden, and 10-year-olds Nelson Mendoza, Tommy Nelson and Karington Ben — were plucked from Washington-area dance schools to perform last week with the renowned Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. And they were chosen by someone who once trod the same path.

Renee Robinson, who danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 30 years, grew up in the District. One of the children trained in the studio where Robinson started

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TONY POWELL

TOP: Nelson Mendoza, 10, and the other students rehearse before last week's performance. **ABOVE:** The 9- and 10-year-olds dance in the second section of "Revelations," which uses soft blue lighting to depict Ailey's own baptism.

A 'full circle moment' for Alley dancers

ALLEY FROM B1

her career.

"I knew I could work with them," Robinson said. "But I just really wanted them to, first and foremost, have a great experience."

The students were selected to perform with the company in its annual presentation of "Revelations," choreographer Alvin Alley's signature work. The production has remained largely unchanged since Alley debuted the gospel-inspired work in 1960. The students' participation was a new addition.

"The babies!" one woman exclaimed, as the children took the stage. Their steps were careful and confident. They rolled their small bodies backward, in line with dancers more than twice their age who followed behind.

Hours before the performance, the students appeared unfazed by the prospect of dancing in front of 2,000 people.

"When I got here I got a little nervous, but when I saw the [Alvin Alley dancers] I got more comfortable," said Karington, who trains at Jones-Haywood Dance School in Northwest Washington.

Tommy, who trains with City-Dance, said he would calm his

nerves onstage by finding a spot in the theater on which to focus. Kinley planned to scan the crowd for her parents.

Some of the students have been dancing for almost half their lives. Ty said his parents enrolled him in dance classes at Maryland Youth Ballet because he wouldn't stop dancing in the middle of his tee ball and football games.

It was an adjustment for his father, Ty said, but now he's supportive.

The young dancers performed during the second section of "Revelations," which uses soft blue lighting to depict Alley's own baptism. Much of Alley's work tapped into the black American experience and was inspired by his upbringing in racially segregated Texas.

The children rehearsed their part of the performance just a few times before Tracy Inman, co-director of the Alley School, deemed them ready.

"I think they're great. They're very focused, disciplined, attentive," Inman said. "This could be a very pressured moment for them."

Inman, another native of the District, studied music at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. But he changed course when he

was awarded a scholarship to study at the Alley School in New York.

Alley opened the school in 1969 for 125 students in Brooklyn. He ran the program until his death in 1989.

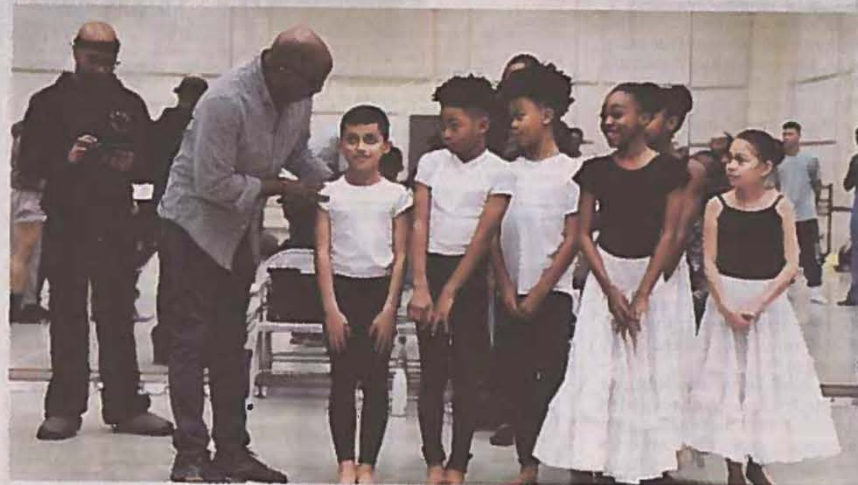
"He had these penny loafers. He would always walk on the backs of them," Inman said. Alley's deep, "barreling" voice, he recalled, "sent shivers up your spine."

But "his creative process had just a way of feeding us," Inman said.

Robinson, the D.C.-raised dancer who selected the students, said she adopted that process when she picked the young dancers to appear on the Kennedy Center stage from among 30 students who auditioned. She gave each of the six dancers a folder filled with information about Alley and why he wrote "Revelations."

"I remember Mr. Alley telling the dancers, 'You have to be more than just technically proficient. You have to be an interesting person. You have to know about the works that you're going to dance,'" Robinson said. "That's a part of my DNA. In a way, that's what I was sharing with the D.C. students."

Samantha Figgins, who studied



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Tracy Inman, co-director of the Alley School, talks with local students, from left, Nelson Mendoza, Ty Miller, Tommy Nelson, Karington Ben and Ashley Bercian, and Kinley Guiden, who is standing behind Karington. Inman studied at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

dance at Duke Ellington, joined the Alley company in 2014. She said meeting the young dancers was a "full circle moment."

"It's a major thing for Alley to give back and continue the legacy for the next generation," Figgins said. "Especially for me, being from D.C."

The students' performance was one of several events that includ-

ed local children. Alley dancers spent the week teaching classes at the Kennedy Center, Duke Ellington, Paul Public Charter School, St. Patrick's Episcopal Day School and Suitland High School in Prince George's County. At a fund-raising gala, the dance company raised nearly \$1 million, some of which will be used to fund educational programs and provide

scholarships for Washington-area dancers to attend the Alley School.

Figgins taught a class at her alma mater.

"I feel like they're all my little brothers and sisters," she said. "I was in the same place. I was getting the same information from the same teachers."

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