

THE BALTIMORE SUN

It's homecoming for 2 Baltimore-area dancers as Ailey II performs at Towson University

By Brittany Britto
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Towson University alumna Jessica Amber Pinkett is a dancer for Ailey II, the junior version of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. (Kyle Pompey)

First, Jessica Amber Pinkett wanted ballet shoes.

Then a tutu and a tiara.

At age 4, dance lessons.

Her mother thought it was a phase, but when Pinkett saw Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell perform with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, she was inspired.

"I thought, 'I want to do that. Where is she from?'" said the Randallstown native, 23, who is a cousin of

Baltimore native and actress Jada Pinkett Smith, a [Towson University](#) graduate (as of May) and a new member of Ailey II, the junior version of the New York-based dance company.

This week, Pinkett, now a resident of Brooklyn, N.Y., will return to the Baltimore area along with Baltimore School for the Arts alumna and fellow Ailey II dancer Courtney Celeste Spears to perform Saturday at Towson University. The two will take the stage not far from the city where they were inspired by the dancers that came before them. This time, it's their turn to make their mark.

Ailey II will also take a weeklong residence at the university, using its space for rehearsals and to host master classes, workshops, and mini-performances for more than 1,300 students from the Baltimore area, according to Fisher-Harrell, 46.

"It's one of those full-circle moments, where you take time to be proud of yourself and you can take the time to really think back on how blessed and gifted we are to do what we do every day. Home always allows for that type of reflection," said Spears, 21, who joined the company full time last year while a senior at [Fordham University](#). She was also the face of Ailey II last season.

Like Pinkett, Spears fell in love with dance at a young age and was particularly inspired by Fisher-Harrell, who was her instructor at the Baltimore School for the Arts.

"I remember seeing a beautiful black woman so statuesque and ... radiant and graceful," said Spears, who is African-American and grew up in Columbia. "It was my first introduction to people of color really shining in dance as an art form."

Fisher-Harrell, a BSA faculty member and an associate professor at Towson University who danced with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for 13 years, has been bringing the Ailey company to Towson's stage for the past six years.

The Baltimore native and BSA alumna remembers the impact it had on her when she watched the company perform at the Lyric Opera House as a student.

"I remember seeing them and thinking, 'I didn't know this exquisite level of dancing was possible, especially as a child of color growing up in the inner city,'" said Fisher-Harrell, noting that it made her appreciate her ballet classes in a new way.

"I just wanted to be in a Michael Jackson video. That's all I knew ... so to see something like Ailey Dance Theater took it to another level for me," she said.

Towson is the first stop on Ailey II's fall tour, which will include a new piece "Sketches of Flames" by Bridget Moore and "Revelations," a classic by the company's late founder Alvin Ailey, among others.

Pinkett, who attended the Carver Center for the Arts and Technology and Baltimore Dance Tech, said the return to her alma mater is a chance for her to show family, friends and professors what she's been working on with Ailey for the past two months.

"It's probably going to be moments of nostalgia," she said, remembering late nights in the university's dance studio.

Fisher-Harrell, who mentored Pinkett, said, "You wouldn't have to tell her to rehearse more. She was always in the studio even when she didn't have to be.

"Jessica has always been one of those dancers where you can't take your eyes off of her. ... She has this raw talent, and she has this powerful energy. I call it a fearless energy."

Dancing is her lifeline, said Pinkett, who now finds herself in the limelight, much like her cousin, Pinkett Smith. Yet Pinkett emphasizes that while the two are close, they are on their own paths.

"She expressed to me that I am my own person and I am my own light, and I should showcase myself in the most beautiful way possible," she said, and that's what she plans to do this weekend during her return to Baltimore.

For Spears, the homecoming is surreal, she said. It was here at the Baltimore School for the Arts that she was encouraged to take dance seriously.

"It started to shape me for my future and made me realize that I love dance, it was my passion, and I could make a life out of this," said Spears, who looks forward to engaging with students and aspiring dancers, and her mother's home-cooked meals.

Of the performance, Spears said, "expect magic."

"You're going to have such young people and artists who are just so eager to make our mark on the dance world," she said.

"There's a type of movement for everybody."