Alvin Ailey instructors share their best steps

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While the upbeat jazz of Duke Ellington played in the background, Abin
Alley American Dance Theater instructors taught their choreography to a
group of students Feb. 16 at Miami’s Phillips Wheatley
Elementary School.

The school doesn’t have a dance program of its
own, and many of its stu-
dents have never had the
opportunity to take dance
lessons before.

Toussaint Parker, 9, said the lessons were a step
toward fulfilling her lifelong
dream of being a dancer.

“When I was a little
child, I always dreamed
about dancing,” Toussand
said. “Ever since I was a
little girl, dancing was my
life. I loved it.”

Alley dancers have been
traveling the country from
Los Angeles to New York,
teaching their original
ballet “Night Creature” to third- through fifth-graders
from Title I schools, which have a significant
number of children from low-income
families.

In Miami, they stopped
at Charles R. Drew Magnet
School — which Alvin Alley
artistic director Robert
Battle once attended — and
Phillips Wheatley for a week
of classes.

“We look for schools that
don’t have the funds some-
times to bring in a program
like this,” said Nasha Tho-
mas, an instructor and
national director of Allevia-
Camp, the theater’s sum-
mer program. “This is a
very expensive program; we’re very fortunate to
have sponsors.”

The students chosen are
all beginners who have
never had professional
lessons.

“These children have
had no experience with
dance,” Thomas said. “So
it’s an introduction and it
really is about them having
fun, being creative.”

Thomas said the kids use
their imaginations to de-
sign the final dance, with
the help of the instructors.

“Night Creature” was
first choreographed by
Alvin Alley in 1974. It’s a
lighthearted ballet about
the creatures that come out
at night, filled with comic
elements and set to the
music of Duke Ellington,
according to Thomas.

“Some of the exercis-
ers they did was they cre-
ated nocturnal animal dances,”
she said. “They had to
choose a group — we have
bats and foxes and wolves
—and they had to think
about how these animals
move, the characteristics
that they’re known for and
how we show that through
movement.”

Besides the choreog-
raphy, students also learn
about music, the history of
dance and poetry. Each
lesson ends with a writing
assignment. One such
assignment was to write a
haiku about the moon.

Phillis Wheatley Prin-
dent Cathy Williams said her school was chosen because
of its proximity to the
Adrienne Arsht Center,
where the Alvin Alley com-
pany performs Thursday
through Sunday.

“I believe they want to
provide our school, which is
in a low socioeconomic
neighborhood, an opportu-
nity to participate in a
program where the stu-
dents may not be able to
afford their own profes-
sional dance classes,” Wil-
liams said.

Williams chose students
to participate in the pro-
gram who she believed
would be interested in
learning more about dance.

“Our principal saw us
dancing in the hallway or
in our classroom,” said
Valoire Thompson, 13, who participated in the
classes. “We went to the library, and she told us a
little bit about the program and she asked us if we
wanted to do it, and we had permission slips for
our parents to sign.”

Toussaint Parker said she
danced class practicing
once and wanted to join it.

“I saw this class at
Alley Park,” Toussain said.

“They started dancing and
I tried some of the moves. I
did the moves so good, and
the teacher saw me and
she instantly wanted me to
be in her class.”

Valoire and Toussaint
both said they loved being
in the program. Valoire
said his favorite part of the
classes was the warm-up
dance, while Toussaint said
her favorite part was learning
the “Night Creature”
choreography.

The students will go to
the Arsht Center on Friday
to watch an Alley perform-
ance, including the ballet
they learned in class.

Some of the older young-
sters are also eligible to
apply for AlleyCamp, a
six-week, no-cost summer
camp, which is open to
ages 11 to 14.

“That is an opportunity
for them to continue to
dance if they have an inter-
est in it,” Thomas said.

“We’ve identified some
very talented students and
a lot of times that’s how
they get picked.”

Children don’t have to
attend to join the camp.
They’re chosen based on
one-on-one interviews.

“They look for the chil-
dren who want to be
there,” Thomas said. “That
want to come to camp
every day, that perhaps
have not had a lot of op-
opportunities for a special
program like this.”

Thomas said sometimes
the kids are chosen be-
cause they’re going
through personal struggles.

“Children who are may-
be struggling in school,
who don’t have a lot of
support at home,” Thomas
said. “Children who have
low self-esteem. Maybe
some bullies or children
who fight a lot in school.
Those are the things that
we’re looking for because it
really is about the develop-
ment of the child.”

Thomas said the pro-
gram is about more than
just dance. It’s a dance camp,
but it really is about
teaching them life skills.
How to be a productive
young person and how to
change.”