

Alvin Ailey's dance camp provides second home for at-risk youth in Newark

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Few, if any of a specially selected group of 103 Newark students have ever stepped foot on a stage. But with each new position, leap and plie the magic of Alvin Ailey's American dance camp weaves in each of them a powerful new story through movement.

"AileyCamp gives these young people a place where they can feel like it's home," said the National Director of AileyCamp, Nasha Thomas. "They are loved and respected. Their voices are validated and they're cared for. And it gives them a chance to blossom."

The six-week program is celebrating its seventh year in

Newark. AileyCamp is an innovative summer program for 11- to 14-year-olds that uses dance and arts to encourage self-awareness and build self-esteem.

"AileyCamp is for inner-city children whose parents don't have the resources for them to participate in a program like this and experience the arts. We're looking for young people who want to be here, young people who want to work hard, who want to learn new things and better themselves and have some hardships," explained Thomas.

The camp is offered by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Now in 10 cities nationwide, the camp reaches more than one thousand underserved youth. In Newark, Prudential Financial is the lead funder. The program is hosted in collaboration with Newark Public Schools and NJPAC. Classes are offered in ballet, jazz, modern and West African dance.

"When I go home I practice and then tomorrow I can't wait to show what I did at home," said first-year camper Yathukshika Kandeepan.

"You know this is the 'selfie' age phase, these young people are trying to figure out who they are, what they like, what they don't like and navigate their lives," said Thomas. "AileyCamp is the place that allows them to do that."

Ask anyone and they'll tell you: the foundation of AileyCamp is built from personal development courses. Each day starts with an affirmation.

Campers learn conflict resolution and how to deal with peer pressure. They also learn health and nutrition along with critical thinking skills.

Third-year camper Michael Fuks explained, "It can be like an outlet to certain issues in life. I've always used dance as an outlet, but this shows it's not just me, it's other people, too."

Newark offers a percussion class, too. Make no mistake, the students may have the synchronicity and rhythm now, but they started from scratch. Thomas sees the growth with each passing week:

"Dealing with a family member who might be incarcerated, or being raised by a guardian not a parent, or having siblings who aren't good role models or examples. Just struggling in school and life, children that don't have the opportunity to do something fun."

The mission is to become better people, not just dancers.

The 103 campers were selected out of a pool of 160 Newark students and participate for free. The camp culminates Aug. 11 with a performance at NJPAC.

Watch the video here: <http://www.njtvonline.org/news/video/alvin-aileys-dance-camp-provides-second-home-risk-youth-newark/>