



I live next to a world-class dance institution. It changed my sons' lives

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When Lucy wanted to find a place in her Hell's Kitchen neighborhood to send her two young and very active boys, she didn't have to look very far. Her family lives next to Alvin Ailey, the famous dance school. At the time, she had no idea what a big impact weekly dance lessons would make on her sons' lives, or how the culture and discipline of dance would shape them as teens who are now in high school. Here's Lucy's story.

In 2002, I moved to Hell's Kitchen as a newlywed. At the time it was a hotspot for restaurants and nightlife. And even when we decided we wanted to start a family, we opted to stay in the area rather than move to a more family-friendly area like the Upper East Side. It was important to us that we have access to the theater, arts, Central Park, and a fairly easy way to get to Brooklyn—where my mom was living.

My sons, Joshua and Xavier, were born two years apart. Having two young boys with tons of energy in a NYC apartment was daunting at times. My husband really wanted them to have a physical activity to do, along with something musical. But I couldn't imagine them sitting still for music lesson and practicing in the apartment throughout the week. Although my husband earned a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, I didn't want my boys to learn martial arts either. I did sign them up for swim lessons on the Upper West Side, but it wasn't enough activity for them. Thankfully, we lived right next to a place that would change my sons' lives.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater School is right next to our building and I thought, why not check it out. They began weekly lessons there at ages 2 and 4—and now, even as teens, they continue.

The first time we took them into the school, they started bouncing to the music that was playing in the classrooms. They were super curious about where the music was coming from and were able to peep inside the rooms. They started smiling as they watched dancers do their thing. We immediately signed them up for a class to test out if they'd enjoy going. Some of the other children would have meltdowns at times and resist going into class, my boys always eagerly ran in.



We started out slow—their first taste of dance was ballet and we stuck with only that for the first three years. Over the years, they tried everything.

Friends couldn't believe how dance made them fit and less hyper. Alvin Ailey offered boys-only classes—our friends and families all were surprised. Everyone really supported their interest.

Over the years they also learned how to perform in public and not have stage fright. They both learned poise and self-confidence. My older son has been on stage at both the Apollo and Lincoln Center for fundraising events. My younger son danced in the Macy's Day parade!

My whole family has met others in the dance community and have become good friends with other dance families who we can see often because they come to the school on our block all the time. It's easy to meet up and foster strong relationships for the whole family.

Because my children liked the activity so much I tried out a few classes myself for exercise. I took West African dance, and it kicked my butt. I was sore for a week! I also took Ailey Bar, which is great for toning and stretching.

In retrospect that place has changed our lives and shaped my sons into the young men they are today. Not only did they have a physical activity, they have also been exposed to different musical genres while learning internationally and culturally diverse dance techniques such as ballet, jazz, tap, modern, West African, hip hop, and flamenco.

But that's not all. My kids were taught by Mr. Ailey legacy teachers. Some were students and company members who worked with Mr. Ailey himself. Mr. Ailey believed that children should not be in the streets doing nothing. In keeping with that spirit, The Ailey School has become a second home for my kids. If they are in need of a quiet space to study or stretch, they're always welcome to use one of the smaller rooms.

Living next to this institution has (almost) only positively impacted our lives, with a few very small exceptions. One challenge would be the backed up traffic on 55th Street and Ninth Avenue, especially on weekends with parents dropping and picking up kids in their cars. Another nuisance is parents double parking for drop off, which causes traffic.

My older son has been with the school for 13 years and my younger son 10 years. My oldest goes to LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts and majors in dance. My youngest goes to Beacon High for humanities. Both plan on continuing at Alvin Ailey and want dance in their lives wherever they end up. For now, they practice after school three days a week and on Saturdays.

Our boys will likely go away to college, and my husband and I plan on living here. Living next to a dance institution has brought us so many fond memories and has been an anchor point for our family.