

Evening of dance helps to lay groundwork for future stars

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By Christina Hennessy

On the days Troy Powell meets with the youngest of aspiring dancers, he is often reminded of another child.

"I see myself in them," he said.

Powell, who began training at 9, got his start as a scholarship student at the Ailey School more than 35 years ago. He eventually became a member of Ailey II, and later joined the New York City-based Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Last year, he was chosen to lead Ailey II, a company of young dancers and emerging choreographers, succeeding founding artistic director Sylvia Waters. From time to time, Powell will meet with young people participating in AileyCamp, a free program that provides young people a summer of dance, creative writing and personal development activities.

"It is a mirror image of what I came up through," he said.

Powell and the company he leads will be in Westport as part of a benefit for the Neighborhood Studios of Fairfield County, a Bridgeport-based nonprofit community arts school that has coordinated AileyCamp in Bridgeport for 15 years. The dancers will perform three works Sunday, March 10, at the Westport Country Playhouse: "The External Knot," a 2007 work by Powell; "Divining (1984)," the first major work by artistic director emerita of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Judith Jamison; and "Revelations," the late Alvin Ailey's signature piece that premiered in 1960. It is the only Fairfield County appearance of Ailey II this year. Powell sees the evening as a way to exhibit the legacy of 55-year-old dance company.

"It's about passing that torch," he said. He feels a responsibility to continue the creative work of his predecessors and the outreach that has furthered the lives and talents of many young people.

He said his piece is autobiographical in nature, featuring "a lot of images and little things that explain and depict my life, and what it was like to grow up in the Ailey family." His latest role has him nurturing dancers and choreographers at the start of their careers. He said it is a perfect way for him to give back, after having received so much from the organization.

"I definitely see a spurt happening in me," he said. "I am continuing to grow and mature as I learn about so many things." That sense of maturity and promise is something that has long sustained Westport resident Harold Levine. Levine, who recently stepped down as chairman of Neighborhood Studios, helped to bring the Ailey program to Bridgeport. His 25 years of service to Neighborhood Studios will be honored Sunday night, during a reception and special presentation by Jamison.

"It is extraordinarily gratifying to see a youngster come in smiling and happy and feeling a sense of self that they didn't have," he said.

Although Levine is honored to get the attention, he said it would be even more rewarding if the event raised enough funds to expand the AileyCamp program in Bridgeport. Levine, who was a founding partner of the creative advertising agency Levine, Huntley, Schmidt & Beaver, retired from the advertising business in 1991, but never really stopped working, particularly when it came to education and the arts.

"I decided I wanted to devote my time to help kids learn, develop and try to make up for what the schools, family or the community couldn't provide," he said of his work in Bridgeport. He said the students are bright and capable and really just need a boost from people who care.

"What we really are doing is putting our arm around a child and saying, 'I believe in you, you count and you can really make it,'" Levine said.

Westport Country Playhouse, 25 Powers Court, Westport. Sunday, March 10, 5 p.m. reception, 7 p.m. show. \$225 reception and performance; \$150, \$75. 203-227-4177.



Ailey II artistic director Troy Powell's "The External Knot," will be one of three selections the New York City-based company performs during a visit to Westport Country Playhouse in Westport, Conn., Sunday, March 10, 2013. It is a part of a benefit for Bridgeport-based Neighborhood Studios of Fairfield County. The show starts at 7 pm. For more information, 203-227-4177, <http://westportplayhouse.org>. Contributed photo: Eduardo Patino