

South Bend Tribune

Alvin Ailey Outreach Teaches Dance To Local Students

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By Gene Stowe

SOUTH BEND -- It's a moving experience when Nasha Thomas-Schmitt brings the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's program to schools.

Thomas-Schmitt, a dancer now in charge of the company's outreach program, put students in the South Bend Community School Corporation's arts magnets and others through their paces last week in advance of an Alvin Ailey performance coming Tuesday and Wednesday at the University of Notre Dame. The shows are sold out.

"Anybody can dance," she explained to more than 50 students at Dickinson Intermediate Fine Arts Academy. "How many of you got dressed this morning?"

She pantomimed pulling on pants, lifting arms into shirt sleeves, brushing teeth, rolling on deodorant, applying lip gloss. "That is all movement. Dance is not always ballet and pretty lines. Anybody can do it."

Micah Jackson, who has danced since he was 6 years old, jumped at the opportunity.

"I learned that there's more to dancing than what people say," he said. "It's all about passion and beauty. It's an art. It's a lifestyle. It shows you a personality and how you express yourself."

"It helped me get loose. At my house, I practice in the garage. I get loose practicing the moves."

Thomas-Schmitt urged the students, lined up in the school gym, to get loose, first with a word-association exercise to expand their understanding of "dance" – "cool," "movement," "attitude," "amazement," "Michael Jackson," "makes you happy."

They rubbed their hands together, raised their arms and stretched before a choreographed session – "right, left, right, touch; left right left touch" – adding one clap, then two, one high in the air and one low to the floor.

"If I can bend down and I'm 50 years old, then you can bend down," she urged them, adding fist-pumps, whole-body circles with arms in the air, the "birdie" with elbows up winglike, and the "jazz hand," fingers open and splayed.

"It's a group, and you want everybody to look like one person," she said as the students attempted synchronicity.

Thomas-Schmitt also led groups at Perley Elementary, Clay Arts High School, Saint Mary's College/Notre Dame Dance students and Southold Dance, with a focus on Alvin Ailey's signature "Revelations."



Micah Jackson, a sixth-grader, follows along to a dance taught by Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, not pictured, national director of AileyCamp, during a class at Dickinson Intermediate Fine Arts Academy in South Bend. (South Bend Tribune Photo/James Brosher)

“The Performing Arts Center thinks it’s very important to use our resources to help the local schools, especially the arts magnets,” says Sean Martin, community engagement program director at the DeBartolo Performing Arts Center. “This is how we get to bring Ailey to them.”

For more information on Alvin Ailey performances at the center, visit performingarts.nd.edu.

