

Alvin Ailey education staff teaching students about dance, discipline and the world around them (Gallery)

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By Michael Huebner

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama – Nasha Thomas Schmitt, a former Alvin Ailey company member and now Ailey Arts in Education Master Teacher, was in residence Thursday at William J. Christian K-8 School to lead about 50 area middle school students in “Revelations: An Interdisciplinary Approach.”

The session put students through some of the rigors they might experience in Alvin Ailey's signature work, “Revelations” – reaching skyward, floor movement, moving from side to side – but also taught them about Ailey's life and artistry.



Nasha Thomas Schmitt leads students at William J. Christian K-8 School Thursday in “Revelations: An Interdisciplinary Approach.”

A landmark collaboration for the Alys Stephens Center, it focuses on the study of language arts, social studies and dance. It is the first such program for ArtPlay, ASC's arts education arm. Thursday's session was the third in this round of training.

Schmitt has already seen results.

“The children have embraced the work,” she said. “They are open to sharing. They're engaged. They are learning not only about Alvin Ailey and the organization and the arts; we talk about a lot of other things that are part of that world, and about each other.”

Two members of the Ailey staff – teaching artist Noibis Licea and percussionist Matthew Hill – have joined Schmitt in the endeavor. There may even be some budding dance stars among the students.

“A couple of boys, actually,” Schmitt said. “They're pretty amazing.”

Created in 1999, the program's aim is to spark students' analytical and creative skills as they learn about “Revelations” and the life of its choreographer. Using lesson plans designed by Ailey artists, students can connect the stories to their academic studies, their lives and their communities, as well as the broader world around them.

Students from St. Barnabas Catholic School are also participating in the program, which culminates next year with a “Meet the Artist” free school program on March 17, and public performance on March 28 by Ailey II, the acclaimed second company of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Theresa Harper Bruno, chair of ASC's corporate board, is thrilled about the collaboration.

“This residency will be an invaluable experience for local students and educators, offering unparalleled opportunities for learning, growth and development,” Bruno said in a statement. “Providing programs like this is one of the reasons ArtPlay exists, and it helps fulfill ASC's mission of making the arts available to everyone.”



