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OCTOBER 16,  
2013

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One of Alvin Ailey's star dancers, Dominican American Belen Pereyra, talks about her inspirations and how she made it to one of the most prestigious dance companies in the world.

### What inspired you to dance?

When I was younger my first initial reason to dance was my mother just put me in a program. She had a love for dance and singing herself. It started off as just a hobby then became a very powerful medium to express myself and enjoy my youth. It was the way I met so many incredible people. I decided to pursue it full heartedly in high school. It just became clear that dance was the only thing I ever wanted to do. It was the only thing that could fulfill me. It was my way to grow up. It inspires me on daily basis. For me, to dance is to breath.

### What has been the biggest challenge?

I wasn't really able to go to college because of immigrational purposes, like qualifying for financial aid, even though I was at the top of my class. A lot of schools didn't admit me. Some schools didn't admit me because I didn't have the typical dancer body. I was thicker, I was Latina, I loved my rice and beans and my food, but I had to make some serious decisions. One of the hardest things was transitioning to healthy eating because in my culture I wasn't raised that way, but it was the best transition I ever made. I'm a better dancer for it. Also, the level of talent was a challenge. There are so many incredible dancers. Everybody can do what you do. It's hard to find your niche. The thing that really set me apart from others was my background. My first dance was with a Peruvian dance group, so it wasn't a typical ballet dance. It was a celebrating Latinos type of performance. It brought a lot to my style.

### How has being Latina helped you in your career?

My mother has inspired me and I'm sure it has to do with her coming from Dominican Republic. She's a hard worker — she does not take a break. I learned that even when circumstances are not aligned as you wish they were, you have to pull through. In the Latin community I saw a lot of different situations and it inspired me that those people and my mother could do that. As a Latina woman I feel like I have a responsibility for my generation and my family.

### What is one thing you wish you knew going into this field?

I used to think if I get to where I need to get it's going to be easy once I get there and it would be a smooth ride, but it hasn't been the case. I continue to grow, but it never gets comfortable. I don't think I would ever say "I made it and I'm completely set." When you get there it's always a lot more work! I wish knew it but it doesn't bother me that I learned it now.