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## Moving toward a better life



CHRISTOPHER T. ASSAF/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Nija Maple and Xan Evans rehearse their steps during a session of ballet instruction at AileyCamp at Towson University. The camp focuses on fostering good self-esteem and healthy social skills in preteen children through dance and other forms of creative self-expression. The campers have their final performance today. **ARTICLE, NEWS PG 2**

## Campers get in step with themselves

2-week session of dance and self-expression gives kids skills they need to thrive

BY CARRIE WELLS  
The Baltimore Sun

Sprawled out on their stomachs or hunched over pieces of paper, two dozen preteens gathered in the cool darkness of the theater stage and mulled over what kind of legacy they would leave behind.

Tracie Jiggets, responsible for helping to shape their self-confidence and social skills at a two-week summer camp held at Towson University, paced the floor and prompted the children to say how they wanted to be remembered when the camp ends today.

"I wanted to leave behind my positive attitude and I want people to remember me for my kindness," one girl said in a near-whisper. Another camper let out an audible scoff and the girl looked crestfallen.

AileyCamp, named in honor of the late Alvin Ailey, a choreographer and activist who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City, is part dance camp and part road map for the tricky terrain of the middle-school years. The roughly 50 children ages 11 to 14 who participated in the camp this summer were interviewed before being selected, with organizers looking for children from underserved populations of Baltimore who needed help with their self-esteem and who could benefit from learning creative expression.

Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, the national director of AileyCamp, said many of the students are seeking support.

"They're looking for someone to identify with," Thomas-Schmitt said.

The camp, which ran from June 19 to today, started this year as a pilot, with Towson University donating space in its Center for the Arts. Next year, organizers



CHRISTOPHER T. ASSAF/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO  
Twelve-year-old Indya Allen listens to the instructor during a ballet session at AileyCamp on the campus of Towson University. The camp for preteens ends today.

hope to double the number of campers and by 2016 expand the session to six weeks.

The children work with professional dancers on modern, ballet, jazz and West African dance and take classes in "creative communication" using poetry, art and journalism. They get counseling in nutrition, drug and alcohol abuse prevention, and in how to develop social and conflict resolution skills. The children also were provided with breakfast, lunch and a snack, as well as tights, leotards, ballet shoes, backpacks and other items.

The camp was founded in 1989, the year of the death of Ailey, who promoted opportunities for African-American dancers. About 900 children will participate in nine camps nationwide this summer, including in Kan-

sas City, Berkeley, Calif., and Miami. The Towson University camp is the only one in Maryland.

In one of the creative communications classes held this week, Autymn Epps, 13, showed off three works of art she had made. One features a waterfall and a poem that plays on the word "pores."

Autymn explained: "Your emotion pours, and it comes from your pores. And we just put it into dance."

The camps are funded through donations, corporate sponsorships and fundraising. Susan Picinich, dean of Towson's College of Fine Arts and Communication, said the university raised about \$30,000 to cover expenses this year, and hopes to raise at least \$60,000 for the expanded program in 2015.

"The 11-to-14 age group, this is the sink-or-swim era, right?" said Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell, a Towson professor and former member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company. Fisher-Harrell helped encourage the national organization to open a camp in Baltimore. "They make hard decisions, they either like something or they don't. We want to create a nurturing environment."

Taleah Edwards, a soft-spoken 12-year-old from Baltimore, said that in one exercise, she and other campers picked out three African symbols to represent various attributes. Taleah said she picked symbols for faithfulness, patience and bravery because she felt they represented her.

"I feel more outgoing, that I can be myself here," said Taleah, explaining that she usually had a tendency to be introverted and shy. She said she was looking forward to showing her mother, father and little sister what she learned in the camp at the final performance today.

"I like that you get to show emotion in dance," she said. "When you see people dance you can see if they're happy or broken down."

cwells@baltisun.com  
twitter.com/cwellsun