



Against Odds, This Queens, N.Y. Latina Made Her Dream To Dance A Reality

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From battling scoliosis at an early age to touring the world with one of the country's premier dance troupes, Samantha Barriento never felt out of tune with her passion for dance.

"There is never a day that I question whether or not this was a good decision," Barriento told NBC News.

Barriento spent a year touring with the Ailey II dance troupe, the second company of the prestigious Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and returned to New York for her second and final season with the company.

At age 12, Barriento became enamored by dance when she saw an Alvin Ailey Performance of "Episodes" at the New York City Center. Linda Celeste Sims, a Latina dancer on stage stood out to Barriento.

"I saw this Latin woman who looked so much like me come out on stage, I'd never seen anyone like that. She looked so powerful and so vulnerable at the same time," she said.



In one of her first performances, Barriento channeled Michael Jackson in a fedora hat and jazz shoes as she moonwalked across the stage.

"I realized that the crowd reacted in a certain way and it just made me feel like nothing had made me feel before and I just knew I had to do that for the rest of my life," she said.

Barriento almost lost her shot at her dream to dance professionally when she was told that she had scoliosis at an early age. The musculoskeletal disorder plagues 2 percent to 3 percent of the population in the United States.

"I went through a period of being told I'd have to be in a brace for a period of time and that I wouldn't be able to take classes during that time. It was a very scary realization for me because I couldn't see myself not dancing," Barriento said.

Barriento made an effort to combat the disorder with strengthening exercises that helped minimize the curve aligning her shoulders and hips.

The ballet industry is notorious for its highly competitive nature and its physical demands on dancers. A study by the Center for Injury Research and Policy found that there was a 37 percent increase in dance related injuries from 1991-2007 highlighting the intense toll that the career takes on dancers.

"There are days where it's hard and you're scared. You don't know what the future holds. You go to the auditions and you get the no's," Barriento said. "I've been there and I think we've all been there, but it's part of what makes you a stronger human being and makes you be able to go out in the world and approach these auditions fiercely."

A lack of diversity in the ballet industry has been a sensitive topic over the last few years. The factors that have contributed to this issue are often economic inequality, the lack of role models for aspiring dancers, and a failure of dance institutions to facilitate the upward growth of its young dancers of color.

Last year, Misty Copeland became the first African-American performer to be appointed as a principal dancer for the American Ballet Theatre. Copeland's appointment represented a major change in direction for the industry towards a generation of ballet dancers that would be more inclusively representative of the community like Barriento.

Although there have been some pioneer Hispanic ballerinas, like Evelyn Cisneros-Legate, considered to be the first Hispanic prima ballerina in the U.S, there lacks a strong Hispanic presence in the ballet industry. In 2005, The New York Times reported that nearly half of the principal dancers at Ballet Theater and at the Boston Ballet were from Latin America or Spain. This year, only two of the 17 principal dancers at the American Ballet Theater and only two of the 11 principal dancers at the Boston Ballet are from Latin America.

A key tribute to the presence of Latin American ballet dancers are companies in Latin American countries like the Ballet Nacional de Cuba which is funded by the Cuban government has produced some of the highest quality dancers in the industry. Despite the growing influx of dancers who have fled from Cuba and other Latin American countries for artistic and economic reasons, Hispanics who are the largest minority in the United States, still remain poorly represented in the front-lines of ballet.



"Being a Latina dancer from Queens in the company is something I'm very proud of. I get to represent a whole heritage of people and show that anyone who works hard can follow their dreams like I did."

While touring on the road, the Ailey II troupe often works 10 hour days rehearsing, performing, and traveling. Despite many physically and mentally strenuous days, Barriento remains adamant about the decisions she's made in her career.

"Even still with all the hardships of auditioning and questioning whether you're good or not every single day, there's no feeling like what it feels like to dance for me."

Samantha Barriento was scheduled to perform with Ailey II from March 30 - April 10 at the Ailey Citigroup Theater.

Watch Video here:

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/against-odds-queens-latina-made-her-dream-dance-reality-n550211>