

For AileyCamp kids, dance also builds character

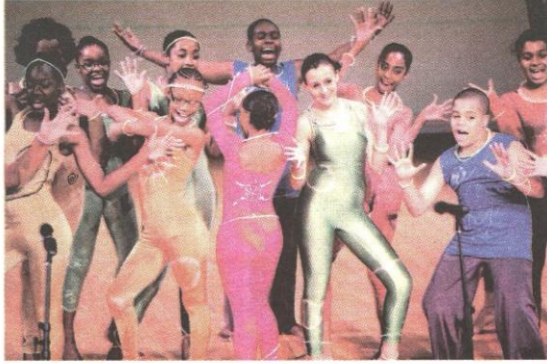
By ZITA ALLEN

Special to the AmNews

Recently, some 80 youngsters from 11 to 14 years old burst onstage at Columbia University's Miller Theatre for a delightful performance

what the future holds.

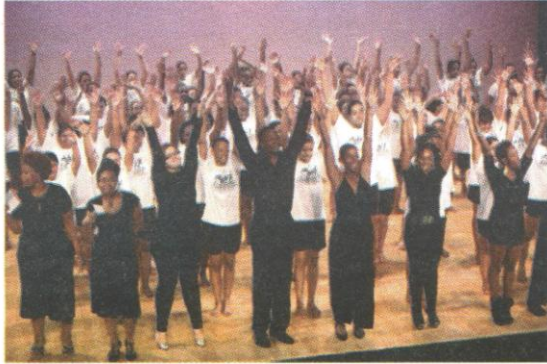
That, after all, is one of the primary missions of the Ailey Camps, said Judith Jamison, artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. She sat backstage as family,



showcasing the skills acquired during a six-week intensive training at the AileyCamp.

Of course, AileyCamp is not so much a training ground for professional dancers as it is a wonderful opportunity for 1,000 lucky youngsters from around the country to get a taste of the world of dance while tapping into their own creativity and developing the discipline and self-esteem that will serve them well no matter

friends, supporters and fans poured into the intimate jewel-box theater on Columbia's campus to enjoy a performance by kids from one of New York's two AileyCamps. Jamison recalled the genius who gave birth to the famed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and dreamed of someday having a nationwide network of Ailey-Camps, prompting the founding of the first one in Kansas City in 1989. She made that



dream a reality. Now, there is a network of 10 Ailey camps throughout the United States.

Jamison explained that that the camps were Ailey's way of bonding with and giving back to the community that inspired and gave so much to him.

"It's about caring and reaching back and helping someone who maybe wouldn't have thought about this. The mantra for Ailey, for the AAADT, has always been that people who would never think to come to dance get in the theatre and they go, 'Oh, dance can be like this!'"

On Miller Theater stage, the youngsters were radiant as they threw themselves into each piece on the program. And the audience responded vigorously. The kids put their hearts and souls into every step, from the opening—the iconic "I've Been Boked" section of Ailey's masterpiece "Revelations"—through two heart-felt



tributes, one to the late Denise Jefferson, director and guiding light of the Ailey School, and another to Jamison, the heart and soul of the entire institution, and a varied collection of tap, ballet, African and other numbers.

The program showcased versatility nurtured by disciplined technique classes that ran the gamut, while also highlighting something even more intangi-

ble: a sense of their own worth, a sense of self-confidence.

That was most evident when I spoke to three young dancers backstage before the performance. Ten-year-old Marcus Das Chagas didn't skip a beat when asked what he wanted to be when he grows up. "A dancer," he said with self-assurance before repeating one of the affirmations learned at the camp

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and punctuating the end with a snap of his fingers: "I will not use the word 'can't' to define my possibilities."

While Monai Walker isn't thinking of pursuing dance as a career, she said she will remember everything learned at the AileyCamp, especially, "Love yourself and who you are because that's the only you you get."

Proof of the enduring impression of the summer experience was provided by 21-year-old Ailey II dancer Solomon Montgomery-Dumas, who said that growing up on the South Side of Chicago didn't allow him to experience the stuff that dreams are made of until, that is, his mother

convinced him to go to Ailey Camps. While for him, the experience was definitely about dance, he stated, "It was also about personal development," as he recited some of the daily affirmations that, to this day, have served as guiding principals: "I will think before I act," "I will listen to learn" and "I

will greet each day with love in my heart."

Solomon paused and added, "I just feel so blessed to be a part of the Ailey organization. It's just so amazing."

And, judging from the August 12 performance by 80 AileyCamp kids at the Miller Theatre, they would agree.