

Berkeleyside

First Time Sailors Take to the Water, Conquer Many Fears

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By Tracey Taylor



Two crews of AileyCamp students head out of the Berkeley Marina on sailboats.

Photos: Tracey Taylor

This morning, down at the Berkeley Marina, 56 East Bay middle schoolers were experiencing a host of “firsts”. Many of them were taking to the water for the first time — donning life-jackets and sailing out into the Bay — not without a certain amount of trepidation in many cases. On shore, another group was being led in team-building exercises, letting go and learning to trust each other.

The group of students had only met at the beginning of the week, and, although most of the exercises were provoking peels of laughter, some of them triggered frustration and resistance.

All the participants, aged 11 to 14, were at Berkeley’s OCSC sailing school at the invitation of its founder, Anthony Sandberg, and all of them are members of the AileyCamp, a tuition-free, six-week dance and life skills camp for underserved

middle schoolers entirely funded by Cal Performances.

After a week of ballet, modern, jazz and African dance classes, today was field trip day — a chance to get out under the clear blue skies and experience the beauty of the Bay up close. Many of them had never sailed before, and many cannot swim.

Thirteen-year old Jaqarah Weathers, who attends Westlake Middle School in Oakland, said she had been apprehensive about attending the camp and the field trip. “It is scary,” she said. But even after a few days with the campers, Weathers was feeling more at ease. “I’m naturally shy and I hope the camp will give me self-confidence.”

Yejide Najee-Ullah is a veteran of AileyCamp, having attended for the past 10 years, first as a camper, then a volunteer, and most recently, after her college education at Smith, as a staffer. A graduate of Berkeley High, Najee-Ullah said the camp experience had been transformative for her. “I planned my whole summer around being able to do this,” she said.

Watching the group of middle schoolers doing a team-building exercise which involved pretending to be trains, she said the first week for the kids was the hardest. “They are testing each other and conquering their fears.”



Thirteen year old Jaqarah Weathers was nervous about the camp and the sailing, but hopeful that the experience would make her more confident.



A group of AileyCamp students swap stories after coming back from sailing on the Bay.

This year marks the 10th anniversary of Ailey Camp, which was conceived by Alvin Ailey, founder of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and is locally produced by Cal Performances under the direction of David McCauley. It is the only such camp on the West Coast and on a major university campus and Cal Performances raises \$250,000 annually to fund the initiative. The six-week camp culminates in a performance by all the campers at Zellerbach Hall, complete with professional staging, lights, costumes and live music.

McCauley was sitting out on some rocks taking photos of the groups that were heading out on the water in five sailboats. He said he had deliberately assigned the most nervous kids to the first sail of the day because the water is calmer in the morning.



David McCauley, Director of AileyCamp, is a keen sailor himself but appreciates that calmer water will suit nervous first-timers.

McCauley interviews students for the camp — they come from Berkeley, Oakland, Albany and Richmond — but he doesn't audition them. "They don't need to have any dance training. I'm looking for eagerness and an interest in the arts. Most of these students have no opportunity to experience the arts otherwise."

As well as the four dance techniques that are taught at the camp — ballet, modern, African and jazz — there is also an emphasis on personal development. "We teach creative communication and the discipline of dance is very beneficial," said McCauley.

OCSC Director Anthony Sandberg was also snapping pictures of the kids. He said he has been very proud to host the AileyCamp for the past 10 years.

"We've all been blessed with someone who paid attention to us and this is our way of giving back," he said. "It's not like the arts are getting funded."

Sandberg adds that OCSC's 85 employees, particularly the younger among them, are keen to be involved in community projects. OCSC divides its community work into environmental projects and initiatives for kids, such as the Ailey Camp.



OCSC Director Anthony Sandberg is proud to be hosting the AileyCamp students.

The morning sailors returned to the school at about 11:15 am today. Most were looking cheerful and many swapped stories about piloting the boats. One or two had felt some sea-sickness but they didn't regret having gone out on the water. Life jackets were handed off to the group who were slated to sail after lunch.

Although only just out of college, Najee-Ullah was watching over the students like a mother hen. "I love the transformation they go through," she said. "When the curtain goes up [on the end of camp performance] they will be a different group of kids."

This year the AileyCamp show is entitled "Transitions" and it takes place on Thursday, August 4 at 7:00 p.m. at Zellerbach Hall.



Although apprehensive, the majority of students took to the water and were able to wave to photographers on shore.



The AileyCamp field trip includes team building exercises led by Mike Martin.