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Hope BOYKIN ON OVERCOMING OBSTACLES, FAITH AND HER 13TH SEASON with AILEY

By Norma Porter Anthony

Hope Boykin glides into a studio on the 6th floor of the Ailey building effortlessly in a pair of Red Bottom stilettos, as if that same pair of feet had not danced Ulysses Dove's *Vespers* and Rennie Harris' *Home* at the City Center less than 24 hours ago.

Boykin, a native of Durham, North Carolina, did not set out to be a professional dancer. After graduating from Howard University, she decided to audition for companies to see how far she could get in what she calls her "learning of dance."

"In 1994, I went to audition for the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company and I auditioned for PHILADANCO! and I was also assisting Talley Beatty," she said. "I still didn't think about it professionally."

Boykin went on to study dance at The Ailey School, become an original member of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, perform with PHILADANCO! for six years, and receive the prestigious "Bessie" award.

She remembers the exact moment that she decided to pursue dance full-time. "After my first performance with Complexions, Dwight Rhoden came and gave me an envelope," she said. "I thought it was a thank you card. I had no idea that the envelope had a check inside of it. All I could think was 'Yes!' I had no idea I was going to be paid for that performance. I didn't need to be paid; I was gaining so much information, but the fact that he rewarded me monetarily for something that I loved to do just did not make sense. I thought that it would be great to be able to pay my rent, buy groceries, have some things that I want, and be able to go to a movie all off of a salary that I made by doing exactly what I wanted to do."

This year Boykin celebrates her 13th season with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. The key to longevity, Boykin says, is to challenge herself to reach new heights. "Over the last four or five years, I have given each season or six months a new name and I fight to maintain that standard of what I want to create," she said. "If I said I'd wear a scarf everyday, wear pearls or make sure I get up and do one specific thing, I'd strive to do it everyday."

Newcomers and the challenge to lead by example keep her motivated. "The fresh ideas and eagerness from the new people also keep me going because I know that I have to set

an example for however I want them to work, act and react to me," Boykin said.

Although she's a veteran, Boykin says that she still has obstacles to overcome. "I think we all have obstacles daily and they're ever-changing," she said. "It's always something that each person has to deal with. You don't think that the person that has all of the stretch in the world feels tight some place, but there's something that they're dealing with too."



Known for what some may describe as being "full-figured," Boykin says that some dance critics have tried to categorize her as a dancer with an unorthodox physique, a common struggle most dancers of color encounter. "There was an article or review that was complementing me, and they said that I have an unorthodox physique. I was thinking 'Wow! I have two arms, two legs, a nose and a mouth.' I couldn't figure out what was not right about it," she said.

"There is an aesthetic that has been set up, and I'm OK with that," she said. "I'm also grateful that I have been surrounded by people who've said that I am who I'm supposed to be. There's also a scripture in the Bible that says that we are fearfully and wonderfully made."

PHILADANCO! Founder Joan Myers Brown and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's Artistic Director

Emerita Judith Jamison always told Boykin to embrace and fine tune the body she has; they never wanted her to try to be someone else. For Hope, that translates into living "full-out": eating healthy, exercising at the gym and taking classes regularly.

Learning how to juice, snack regularly in rehearsal and try different foods for seasonings instead of salt are tips she picked up by watching others in The Ailey Company like recently-retired dancer Renee Robinson. With a rigorous schedule as a company member, teacher at The Ailey School and choreographer, Boykin says she still has to fight to get to the gym and dance class. "It's not always that you wake up and feel like 'I want to dance today!'" Boykin said. "Some days it's painful, but you have to do it if you want to stay at your best."