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DENISE JEFFERSON 1944-2010

Longtime director of Ailey School had Chicago dance roots

By Sid Smith

SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The art of dance lost a great teacher over the weekend with the death of Denise Jefferson, the Chicago-born director of the Ailey School in New York City.

Picked by Alvin Ailey to run the school in 1984, she led that enterprise for 26 years, mentoring numerous students, including many who joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Martha Graham Dance Company, Mark Morris Dance Group, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and others. Ms. Jefferson, 65, died of ovarian cancer Saturday, July 17, in New York City.

"I'm so indebted to Denise for her tireless dedication to the school for over three decades," Judith Jamison, Ailey artistic director, said via e-mail. "Her instruction and guidance have been instrumental in shaping generations of students whose success brings honor to the entire Ailey organization."

Her smile "brought light to all of us who worked with her and to all of the students who came to their dance life through her nurturing hand and heart," Jamison added. About 90 percent of current Ailey troupe dancers trained at the school, she said.

Ms. Jefferson proved instrumental, after Ailey's death in 1989, in perpetuating his legacy by expanding the school's size and influence. Enrollment, which began in 1965 with 125 students, grew to its current size of some 3,500 pupils. She also developed an innovative program in 1998, affiliating the school with Fordham University to offer a joint bachelor of fine arts degree.

Born in Chicago on Nov. 1, 1944, Ms. Jefferson first studied ballet here with Edna L. McRae. She studied at Wheaton College in Norton, Mass., and got a masters in French from New York University, choosing not to pursue a ballet career because, she said later, the only troupes she'd ever seen were all-white. But she studied at the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance and began her professional career



As Ailey School director, Denise Jefferson built upon the work and vision of founder Alvin Ailey.

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with the Pearl Lang Dance Company; modern dance experience that eventually helped her to oversee the Ailey School's broad range of dance disciplines. She joined the Ailey faculty in 1974.

As director, Ms. Jefferson expanded the junior division of the school to include students as young as age 3 and belonged to a variety of professional organizations, emerging as an international leader in dance education. She taught worldwide, including at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and, in 2009, she received the distinguished alumna award from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools.

She is survived by a daughter, Francesca Harper; a sister, Margo; and her mother, Irma. A memorial at the Ailey studios in New York will be scheduled later.

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