

**An Interview with Lisa Johnson-Willingham: Director of the Ailey Extension**

June 15, 2012

Now before we all set off for the weekend, we have a special introduction we'd like to make... Meet Lisa Johnson-Willingham, former Ailey dancer and current Director of the Ailey Extension at The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Having been a member of the dance theater for six years, Lisa has since moved on to choreograph some of the best pieces for dance companies such as Joel Hall Dance Company, Cerqua/Rivera Art Experience, One World Dance Theater and many more.



This week the amazing dancer and choreographer has set aside time to give us some insight on her career in the arts and what it is that inspires her (which, for someone of such talent, is quite a feat). So before you all clock out for the weekend, we'd like to share our interview with Lisa:

**Name:** Lisa Johnson-Willingham

**Company:** Director of The Ailey Extension, The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

**Field:** Dance

**Motto:** I will not use the word CAN'T to define my possibilities

**1. How long have you been teaching and choreographing dance?**

I believe teaching is a part of my spirit. I started as a teen, I would volunteer to teach dance to the Girls Scouts in my neighborhood. Dance was the joy in my life so I wanted to share it with the world. I am a teacher who focuses on what can be accomplished instead of what cannot be accomplished. I would like to be an example for my students as they journey through stages in life.

Growing up, there wasn't a time where my family and I weren't dancing to all kinds of music in the house. We would choreograph to our favorite songs. In High School I gathered a few of my friends and I would choreograph dances to perform at events around the city. I love to give back to young dancers and teaching life lessons through dance. It has been a passion of mine from a very young age. As a child, I would go into the basement of my house and choreograph for hours. There is something that moves me when I am able to express my deepest feelings through movement.

**2. How long have you been studying dance?**

I've been studying dance since I was 5 years old. I began taking Tap classes, before I moved on the modern and ballet. I began studying other techniques at the National Youth Sports Program during the summers in Washington, DC before attending the Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

**3. How did you get started in dance and when did you realize you could make a living in the space?**

I began my serious training at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and that's where I discovered the world of dance. We would study dance history where I was intrigued by the famous choreographers and dancers. I remember reading about the astonishing Carmen De Lavallade and my world changed forever. I learned how Alvin Ailey began his journey and I knew that this was the life for me.

**4. Where do you get your inspiration when you are dancing or choreographing?**

My inspiration comes from my life experiences and all of the lessons of life, beautiful music that makes me want to create, a wonderful piece of Art or social testimonial.

**5. Tell us about some of the performances you are most proud to have danced in or choreographed?**

The proudest performance for me, of course, is my very first performance with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in "Revelations". However, the most important performances I have had are with my Ailey Camp Chicago campers. To be able to take 80 plus children from underserved communities with no prior dance experience and use the power of dance to enrich their lives by providing hope, personal development and a sense of self worth is a life altering experience.

**6. Tell us more about your work with Ailey and the Ailey Extension.**



The uniqueness of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is the diversity of the repertory; it speaks to people from all walks of life, which connects to the Ailey Extension. We offer more than 70 classes per week in a variety of dance and fitness techniques, like ballet, Masala Bhangra, contemporary, Zumba, Samba, West African, Sharqui bellydance, Pilates, and jazz. The Ailey Extension is about making connections, letting dance inspire you to bring movement into your world in a variety of ways.

**7. Where do you see the Ailey Extension in the future?**

The Ailey Extension has had an incredible year thanks to our instructors and the people who walk through our doors as initiates but leave as dancers. My plan is to keep Mr. Ailey's vision alive via innovation and accessibility,

creating an environment where dance is available to all people. Look out for unique programs that will change the lives of the community around us through master classes, workshops, family classes, and classes for seniors.

**8. Outside of dance, what types of classes do you enjoy or hope to take?**

The class that I would really enjoy taking outside of dance would be cooking classes. I get so intimidated when putting meals together. I love cooking for my family during special occasions but I need a little help in creating the menu.

**9. There may be too many to list, but who would you call your greatest mentor?**

My greatest mentor was my mom. She is a powerful woman who has taught me to dream more than others think is practical and risking more than others think is safe. She has stood beside me through all of my trials and triumphs with her strength and encouraging words. Also, I have several inspiring teachers that have paved the way for me that are like mothers to me.

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