



Kids go to dance camp

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ALVIN AILEY used to tell his dancers, "You are all gods and goddesses," and it's just this kind of affirmation that is the organizing principle behind AileyCamp. The six-week summer camp for at-risk middle schoolers was launched by the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey in Kansas City in 1989, and since has spread across the country. This is its eighth year on the UC Berkeley campus under the auspices of Cal Performances.

Training its sights on Richmond, Oakland and Berkeley middle-school children at risk because of financial, school or family problems, the Berkeley camp chooses 50 boys and girls from grades six through eight each summer and trains them in the rigors of African and modern dance and ballet, schooling them in leadership and personal decorum. The program culminates in a performance at Zellerbach Hall.

The day I visited, a little army of middle schoolers of all shapes, sizes and ethnicities, boys in shorts and white T-shirts, girls in black tights and leotards, was keenly engaged in complex physical exercises. These ranged from unglamorous core training that filled the theater with grunts and groans, to beautiful exercises out of the technique that Ailey himself was schooled in, with intense demands on the torso and strong but supple requirements for the legs.

Naomi Diouf, the statuesque dancer and director, with husband Zak, of the East Bay's Diamano Coura West African Dance, cajoled one group through its routines, prodding and soothing. The message was: Work hard, respect yourself and find joy. It was only the second day, and the exuberant boys, earnest girls and gangly brainiacs all were groping toward that goal. As the weeks progress, they will learn excerpts from the Ailey canon and then perform them at Zellerbach for family, friends and the public — just like the Ailey dancers.

For an inside look at the camp, check out the AileyCamp diary at cpinfo.berkeley.edu/information/education/aileycamp_blog/2009.