



Mayor gives Gary native, her first key to the city

By Matthew Bruce

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One of Gary's native sons made a return to his Steel City roots during a modern dance performance at the West Side High School recently. Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson presented Renaldo Gardner, a member of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in New York, with the key to the city before an auditorium filled with students from several Gary elementary and high schools.

"I can remember the first time I saw this young man dance. And when I saw him, I knew he was destined for great things," Freeman-Wilson told the crowd as she presented her first city key to Gardner. "Every time you dance, we want you to think of us, because you are representing us so well." Gardner also received a salute from the Gary Community School Corp., and recognized as an honorary Indiana Representative in a letter by State Rep. Vernon G. Smith that was read.

"You are one of our products, and we appreciate you coming back to share your talents with our students," School Board Superintendent Myrtle Campbell said. "We are proud of you. And all that we ask is that you will keep the Gary community students and Gary near and dear to your heart."

The 21-year-old Gary native began dancing under the tutelage of local choreographer Toni Simpson and attended the Emerson School for Visual and Performing Arts through his junior year. Gardner moved on to Talent Unlimited High School in his senior year, graduating from the upper-Manhattan school in 2008. Since then, he has earned a scholarship at The Ailey School in New York City, and has trained at several distinguished schools, including the Ballet Chicago and Deeply Rooted Dance Theater. He was a member of the Ailey II group for two years before dancing his way to a spot in the world-renown Alvin Ailey Dance Company in April. During his exploits with the troupe, Gardner has crisscrossed the globe, visiting places like Germany, Paris, Senegal.

He said the honor on Wednesday in Gary was special. "It feels good because this is where I started. Gary, Indiana has supported me since I was a little boy," Gardner said of Wednesday's honors. "Right now, I'm just speechless kind of because it happened so quick. But I feel really good. I'm just blessed, and I appreciate everything."

Gardner's family came out in full force to support him at Wednesday's showcase, which featured a dance performance by Alvin Ailey II sponsored by the West Side Theater Guild. The show, entitled "Reference Point," was a poignant reflection of the contemporary art of dance, and provided the Gary students with a peek into Gardner's craft. It also included Ailey's 1960 masterpiece "Revelations," a spiritually introspective narrative that rhythmically tells the story of African American faith from slavery to freedom. The crowd swelled with pride, cheering on the Gary product when he was introduced following the performance. Afterward, Gardner's mother, Ruby Lee Smith, welled up when talking about the pride she had seeing her oldest child honored in his hometown.

"I always taught him to live his dreams, no matter what people say," she said. "It's like a feeling that I haven't felt before. I knew his friends and the school knew about him, but I didn't think everybody knew. So I was like, 'Wow.'"

Gardner was expected to attend a meet-and-greet ceremony at Indiana University Northwest Wednesday evening. The day was full circle index for Gardner, a lifelong lover of dance, who said he remembered being amazed seeing the Alvin Ailey dancers come to West Side High School when he was a little boy.

"I remember watching, and it was just like, 'Wow,'" he said. "So I know the kids of Gary, they respond well to the arts. It's a good thing, because the arts help you express yourself. Dancing for me is another voice."