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AileyCamp's dance lessons teach youths steps to success in life

BY LAURA MORALES
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On her first day at AileyCamp last year, a 13-year-old named Mary Quintana kept her eyes down and her mouth shut.

The tiny, bespectacled girl was so shy, she was afraid to talk to anyone.

“She comes from a very challenging background. She has blossomed. Mary is now very active in our class discussions,” said Susan Gonzalez, a personal development instructor who helped run the first-ever season of AileyCamp Miami, a summer program that teaches personal improvement, as well as modern, ballet, jazz and West African dance.

This year, on the first day of the camp's six-week season, Mary held her chin up, a smile on her face, as she sashayed across a dance floor with several other girls, stepping to the beat of musician Eric Gore's African drums.

AileyCamp, founded in 1989 and now running in 10 cities, uses dance as a way to help at-risk middle-schoolers in underserved communities practice discipline, develop self-esteem and express their creativity.

From 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. each weekday, teachers put the group -- from 58 schools across the county -- through strenuous dance workshops, all practice for the big show at season's end.

Campers take personal development classes, where they discuss issues such as conflict resolution, peer pressure and critical thinking. They also learn to use outlets such as writing and painting to enhance self-expression.

“The children have a list of daily affirmations, and we try to get them to memorize them and live them,” said Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, national director of AileyCamp.

The 100 boys and girls begin and end each session by stating that “I will not use the word ‘can't’ to define my possibilities” and “I will keep a positive attitude all day every day.”

By having to get up early, pay attention and learn challenging dance routines, the kids change for the better, Thomas-Schmitt said. “We try to instill responsibility, discipline and kindness; [we're] grooming these young people and giving them life skills.”

Supported by county, federal and private funds, the camp provides kids with everything they need, including meals, bus transport and dancing gear.

The weeks of intensive leaping, bending, stretching and gyrating culminate in a showcase performance at the Adrienne Arsht Center's John S. and James L. Knight Concert Hall near downtown Miami.

“For last year's showcase, we had between 1,300 and 1,400 parents and friends from all over the county,” said Arsht Center CEO John Richard. “The kids are looking at the world a little bit differently after this experience.”

On her first day back, Mary, her buddies from last year and the newcomers did their best to keep up with the directions from jazz instructor Karin Bejerano and the camp's local director, Mbewe Escobar.

“Everyone turn to stage left and move up, move up,” Escobar ordered. “And don't bump into the person in front of you! One, and two, and three and four, walk in rhythm!”

Dutifully, the campers obeyed, trying to not dissolve into giggling fits as they glided up and down the floor, filling the room with the squeal of bare feet on polished wood.

Though the camp isn't meant to train future professional dancers, some campers are determined to make it in that world.

Charles R. Drew Middle School eighth-grader Ruben Dixon said he took up dance in sixth grade and hopes to eventually join the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

“Dancing lets me show who I really am,” said the Liberty City 14-year-old, adding that his family -- his grandfather was a dancer -- fully supports his ambition. “I can incorporate my feelings into expressions of movement.”

And Mary, a Norland Middle eighth-grader bound for Krop High's arts magnet program, said AileyCamp has helped her “really improve my technique. I'm doing much better in dance than ever before.”

The Miami Gardens resident and fan of lyrical dance -- a mix of ballet, modern, jazz and tap -- said she's got her eyes locked on the prize.

“After I graduate, I want to study dance at Juilliard,” she said with a grin.

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/07/08/v-print/1722331/aileycamps-dance-lessons-teach.html#ixzz0tCdxximE>