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Steps toward a city's rebirth

Prudential grant aims to encourage Newark turnaround through arts program for students

BY BETH FITZGERALD

THE PRUDENTIAL FOUNDATION is funding Newark's first AileyCamp, a summer camp that embodies Prudential's belief in arts education as a means of revitalizing struggling communities while educating the future work force.

AileyCamp was founded in 1989 by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to enhance the learning and life skills of middle-schoolers while teaching them jazz, ballet and West African dance.

Newark-based **Prudential Financial** is a longtime corporate sponsor of Alvin Ailey, and for a dozen years the foundation has been funding a program that brings Alvin Ailey teachers into several Newark and Trenton schools during the school year.

But this year, for the first time, a \$175,000 foundation grant is bringing nearly 100 Newark youngsters ages 11 to 13 to Arts High School for six weeks of studio dance and personal development aimed at making the campers more successful once they're back at school in the fall.

The camper's personal development is the core AileyCamp mission, said **Nasha Thomas-Schmitt**, a former Ailey dancer and national director of AileyCamp, offered in 10 U.S. cities every summer.

AileyCamp isn't a pre-professional dance program, as no previous dance instruction is required: "One percent of our campers go on to work in the arts field, and 80 percent of our campers go to college," Thomas-Schmitt said.

Shané Harris, vice president of the Prudential Foundation, said Alvin Ailey resonates with the foundation's mission to "build skills and reinforce positive behaviors to help young people be successful in school, and in their career beyond school."

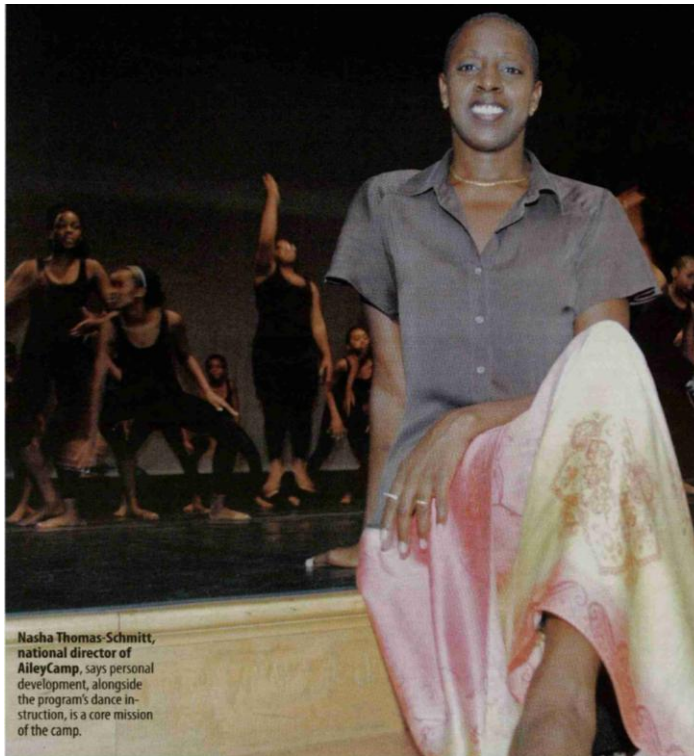
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Harris said "from a business case, it makes a lot of sense for companies like Prudential to be engaged in the conversation of education. We operate in the city and we want to be able to ensure that the community provides the talent for a competitive work force that can sustain the company. So there is a real incentive for business to be engaged in the conversation about how you improve educational outcomes. It speaks to the overall competitiveness of the country."

A key Prudential Foundation goal for Newark, Harris said, "is a broad cross-sector collaboration and partnership to build public will for a high-quality educational system."

The AileyCamp students will wrap up their summer experience with an Aug. 10 performance at Newark's New Jersey Performing Arts Center, a venue for Alvin Ailey performances and longtime arts education partner with the dance company and the Newark schools.

Sandra Bowie, vice president of arts education at NJPAC, said about a third of the AileyCamp students came out of the NJPAC arts education program, and the rest were recruited from throughout the city.



Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, national director of AileyCamp, says personal development, alongside the program's dance instruction, is a core mission of the camp.



AileyCamp students learn developmental skills through dance and other programs offered during the summer. This year, campers at Newark's Arts High School will perform at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center at the end of the session.

"What we are trying to do through our work is to explain that art is educating the whole person," Bowie said. "AileyCamp is not just for the student who wants to dance professionally; we educate the artist in every child."

She said a rigorous arts education experience fuels academic achievement: "The arts help to close achievement gaps and motivate students to stay in school. The arts are a way of knowing — a way of using their own perspectives and judgment and communications skills and problem solving skills — all those 21st century skills."

Sharon Gersten Luckman, executive director of Alvin Ailey, said Prudential has long supported the dance company, sponsoring its New York season each December at City Center and its annual gala fundraiser. She said the 10 AileyCamp Newark teachers are "role models to the young people." Just a few days into a six-week program, "you have focused kids who are proud and are accomplishing things. Every day they can do something they couldn't do yesterday."

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