

Gary native returns to dance roots

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By Lisa DeNeal

GARY - Renaldo Gardner, 21, returned to his hometown Wednesday as a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company, reuniting with former dance instructors and doing a special solo performance at West Side Leadership Academy auditorium during a matinee show by Ailey II which also performed Tuesday night.

Renaldo is a former member of Ailey II and joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company last April. The audience, including members of the Gardner family, gave Renaldo a standing ovation after his solo performance.

“This is something my son’s wanted to do all his life. It is an awesome feeling to see him live his dream,” Renaldo’s mother, Ruby Lee Smith said. “The family has always supported his dream and I’ve told him no matter what people said about him we would always be there for him.”

His full day also included teaching a master’s class to Emerson and DancExcel dance students and taping a television special at Indiana University Northwest.

After the performance, Renaldo said receiving all of this love was overwhelming. “I am just shocked and humbled by the support. It feels great, awesome to be back home and see everyone,” he said.

Renaldo also received a key to the city from Gary Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, and proclamations from State Rep. Vernon Smith, the Gary Community School Corp. and the West Side Theatre Guild.

“I can remember my first time seeing Renaldo dance and I knew he was destined for greatness,” Freeman-Wilson said. “One of the first things I thought of while watching Renaldo perform was Alvin Ailey and how it would be a perfect fit.”

Emerson dance student Deja Key, 13, could not contain her excitement meeting Renaldo. Brewer had to gently push her into Renaldo’s embrace to calm her. “I’ve heard so much about him and I am just thrilled to be a part of his class,” she said.

Renaldo began his dance training with Toni Simpson and is a graduate of Talent Unlimited High School. He attended Emerson School for Visual and Performing Arts and studied with Larry Brewer and Michael Davis. Brewer said when Renaldo was a fourth grader he constantly hounded Renaldo’s mother to have her son audition for Emerson. “When he auditioned, I knew he was not going to graduate from Emerson. I knew he would end up in New York,” Brewer said, adding that Renaldo was performing routines strictly for the high school students while still a sixth grader.

Renaldo’s background also includes The Ailey School, Ballet Chicago and Deeply Rooted Dance Theater and an internship at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. In 2008, he received second place in modern dance from the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts and received the Dizzy Feet Scholarship in 2009.