



Staten Island Advance

GO, CARLOS!

A 12-year-old boy born without arms has made quite an impression on campers and staff at a dance camp

Tuesday, August 04, 2009

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Something extraordinary is happening at IS 61. For the third consecutive summer, the New Brighton school is hosting AileyCamp Staten Island, a six-week program that offers 80 underprivileged children, ages 11 to 14, disciplined dance instruction in ballet, modern dance, jazz and tap as well as other perks like meals and field trips -- all free of charge.

The main objective of AileyCamp, a nationwide program founded 20 years ago by the late choreographer Alvin Ailey, however, isn't to spawn future professional dancers -- though that occasionally proves to be the case.

Rather, the aim is to use dance as a tool to encourage children struggling in school or at home to advance themselves physically, as well as personal development (PD) and creative communication (CC) classes -- which focus on goal-setting, self-discipline, nutrition, positive conflict resolution and self-image -- to lift themselves emotionally.

This summer, in particular, the children feel compelled to work extra hard and put their best foot forward -- all because of a very special, strong-willed tween whose determination to succeed is infectious.

AN INSPIRATION TO ALL

Carlos Simon, a 12-year-old New Brighton boy of Mexican descent, has no arms and one leg that is shorter than the other, yet simply does not acknowledge his differences. The impact he's having on peers and staff members is absolutely tremendous. Thirteen-year-old Breeana Walker especially has been touched by Carlos, as she confessed during a PD class.

Instructor Kimberly Vasquez had asked the campers to write in their journals about who they consider "precious cargo" -- someone meaningful in their lives -- and why. After they had finished, Ms. Vasquez invited the children to read what they wrote, which generally they're too shy to do. This day, Breeana's hand shot up.



"The most precious cargo I've met is a boy in my group named Carlos," Breeana, though uncertain of how he'd react, eagerly read aloud. Carlos, who had been doodling a cartoon on the back of his journal by using a pencil in between his big and second toes, stopped to listen -- and, according to him, he rarely gets pulled away when he's drawing.

Breeana went on: "He is ... so inspiring to me because he never gives up and always gives 100 percent in what he does. Although he has a disability, he is just as equal as anyone else.

"He does not use the word 'can't' to define his possibilities," the Stapleton teen concluded, partially quoting an affirmation the campers recite each morning. Galvanized by Breeana's powerful statement, other kids chimed in, echoing similar sentiments. Ms. Vasquez said it took everything she had not to lose it in front of the children.

PUSHES HIMSELF TO THE LIMITS

Seeing Carlos in action, you'd understand why he's so inspirational.

"He can do anything any of the other kids can do," Renee Shervington told AileyCamp Director Arlette Cepeda when recommending Carlos for the program. The guidance counselor who works with Carlos at IS 61, where he'll be a seventh-grader this fall, however, didn't mention the disability at the time.

So it came as quite a surprise when the tween met face-to-face with a select few, including AileyCamp's national director Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, during the camp's interviewing process. Carlos, who insisted he be treated like everyone else, proved he met all the camp's requirements, including being able to write, with his feet.

As Ms. Cepeda has witnessed for herself, Carlos, who was born with these malformations and has undergone multiple surgeries, can do anything the other kids can do. How? By heavily relying on his feet, legs and torso to accomplish tasks the majority of us use our hands and arms for, said Ms. Cepeda.

She noted before Carlos writes, he sits on the floor and takes off his shoes and socks with his feet. He opens doors by pushing with his torso. He twists off bottle caps and grabs food with his mouth. To get his backpack on, he inserts his head underneath the strap and slings it over his chest. He often employs his legs and feet to clasp items and sometimes he gets creative, like blowing air to turn the pages of his journal. And when he's dancing, Ms. Cepeda said, "He uses his torso as if he had arms. He twists and turns just like anybody else."

So how did he learn to maneuver his body like this?

"It isn't tough; it's like sipping or breathing," Carlos, quite humbly, responded. When asked how he feels about his ability to inspire others, he shrugged off the statement, noting, "We're all human."

SYMBOL OF THE CAMP

What's so remarkable about Carlos' presence at the camp is he encapsulates many of the core values AileyCamp strives to instill in its campers, such as perseverance, a can-do spirit and being comfortable in one's own skin. He's also extraordinarily polite and never complains, said Ms. Cepeda.

And the kids adore him. During free time, they gather 'round him and chant, "Go Carlos! Go Carlos! Go Carlos!" as he freestyles in the middle of the circle.

Being in dance class, where it's all about mastering the way you move your body, the children are very conscious of how deftly Carlos can maneuver his.

"He has a great sense of balance," said Ms. Cepeda.

More than many of us, in fact.

"Sometimes our arms balance our body, but he only does it with his lower extremities," she said. Which must be extremely challenging.

"It's hard to keep balance, so you can only imagine how it would be if you didn't have your arms to do it, or even if some other part of your body is missing," she added.

And though Carlos refuses to admit how much effort he puts in, he's not fooling Breeana.

"He gives it a lot of work," she said. Breeana recalls the day when they were in class doing pliés. She was struggling to get low and looked over to see how Carlos was managing -- and saw he was nailing the ballet move.

"When I saw he was bending deeper than me, I realized I needed to put more effort into it," Breeana said. Carlos continues being a source of motivation for her. When she's feeling frustrated or like she's failing, Breeana said she thinks of him. This "pumps me up to do better."

ISN'T HELD BACK

As Ms. Cepeda said, Carlos really proves "you can do it, even if you do have limitations."

Which is particularly poignant when you consider what Carlos wants to do in 10 years, something he was asked to reflect on for a PD assignment. He said, "I want to be an expert at drawing anime, magna and Japanese games and cartoons." Amazing.

Also remarkable is why he enjoys Japanese animation: In American cartoons, he said, "the hero always wins, but in the Japanese culture, the hero doesn't always win."

Carlos said he also loves singing, street soccer and, most of all, "cute girls." In fact, he has a tip for single men: "To get the girl you like, tell her everything she wants to hear." Seems he's been studying up on the matter.

The last thing he wanted the Advance to know? That his role models are Chuck Norris and Jet Li -- action stars who've worked doggedly to master their movements and gain total control of their bodies.] They sound just like you, Carlos.

