

LIFESTYLE

Dance camp inspires Miami children

By RENEE MICHELLE HARRIS

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Founded by the late Alvin Ailey and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey in 1989, the camp is celebrating its twentieth year of using dance as an instrument from which youth not only learn to move better, but also to feel better about who they are.

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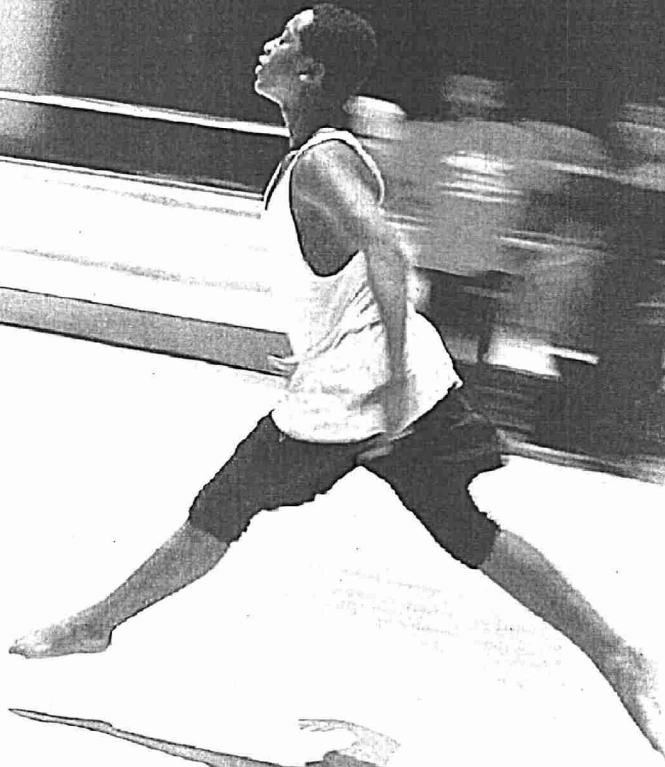
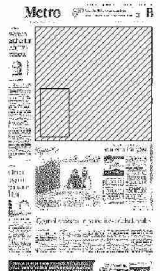


PHOTO BY KHARY BRUYNING
Ruben Dixon



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Eighty-five fortunate Miami-Dade youth had the opportunity to spend four weeks with world-class instructors who taught African dance, ballet, tap and modern dance, which culminated in a performance on Saturday, Aug. 8 at the Arsht Center.

M. John Richard, the Arsht Center's president and CEO, was on hand for Saturday's performance at the Knight Concert Hall and had a bird's eye view of the performers before, during and after the show.

"Their eye balls were bigger than silver dollars. [Prior to the show,] I had the chance to high-five 85 kids, and it was amazing. As soon as they walked onto the stage, all of what they had learned over the four weeks seemed to come together immediately," Richard told the *South Florida Times* during a telephone interview.

The evening, Richard said, was an incredible night for everyone involved: "I mean the leaders from Alvin Ailey, the teaching faculty, the guidance counselor and most importantly the parents."

At 1,200 strong, Richard

said, attendees set an Ailey-Camp record by tripling the number of people who came to a showcase performance of any other AileyCamp in the nation.

On July 29, AileyCamp Miami, the eleventh in the country, opened its doors to parents and the media for lunch and a tour that provided an up-close-and-personal view of what the multifaceted program offers.

In a firm, yet endearing voice, dance instructor Luctricia Welters guided a class of students with dance instruction that was also apropos for life. Her directive to "move without apology" was reinforced by her demonstration of moving gracefully across the floor, head held high, back straight, and arms flowing naturally at her side.

In addition to the dance instruction, each day included classes in personal development and creative communication. Topics of discussion during the personal development classes include goal setting, self-government, nutrition, conflict/resolution, career development and self-image.

AileyCamp's national director, Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, was in town during the open house to meet parents and reconnect with youth whom she met weeks prior during admission interviews.

The 47-year old former principal dancer for the Ailey Company said the program is about far more than teaching children to dance. She said the lessons learned in each of the classes are adaptable to real life. Watching the students bloom, absorbing lessons that will last their lifetime is what the experience is all about, Thomas-Schmitt shared.

When the opportunity for bringing the program to Miami presented itself, Thomas-Schmitt and Deanna Acosta, director of outreach at the Arsht Center, went to work to make it happen - in four months - instead of the usual two-year planning and implementation period for new camps.

Richard said collaborations

like this are "what arts centers should be about." He said inclusion and exposure are important, "but just to participate and just to learn how to dance is not enough."

The relationship with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, he said, takes it to another level.

He explained, "The idea of this is not to create world-class dancers, but to infuse young people with a spirit of discipline, self-esteem, and a sense of purpose and can-do," which he said was in great supply at Saturday's performance.

"The way that this manifested itself onstage, was the spoken word affirmations of all of the dancers during the recital in which they each wrote their own poetry and performed it to movement," Richard said.

And if a successful camp and splendid performance were not enough, Richard said he had the pleasure of sharing a special surprise with the campers, their parents and guardians following Saturday's show.

"We found out on Friday, an anonymous sponsor is paying for their tickets to attend the performance of *The Color Purple* when it comes October and November," he said.

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For more information, log onto www.arshtcenter.org.



PHOTO BY KHARY BRUYNING

Pictured above, from left to right, are Deanna Acosta, director of outreach for the Adrienne **Arsht Center** for the Performing Arts; John Richard, the Arsht's Center's president and CEO; Heather McCartney; and Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, director of arts in education for the Arsht Center.