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MILESTONES » SMALL TOWN TO BIG TIME



Orange native Demetia Hopkins (far right) is a new member of the acclaimed Alvin Ailey dance troupe.

Dancer from Orange is 'so beyond happy'

BY EDIE GROSS
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Demetia Hopkins was tense. She'd spent the day alongside more than 100 other women auditioning for a coveted spot in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company.

And as the day wore on, the number of eligible dancers had dwindled.

Then Sylvia Waters, the artistic director for the organization's junior dance company, called for dancer No. 60.

It was Hopkins' number.

As an aspiring dancer growing up in Orange County, Hopkins had sat wide-eyed in the Kennedy Center audience year after year as performers with the Alvin Ailey dance company electrified the stage.

After graduating from Orange High School in 2005, she'd earned a scholarship to study jointly at The Ailey School and Fordham University in New York City.

And in her senior year, she'd been



Childhood love of dance, hard work land Hopkins on a global stage.

handpicked to join Ailey II, the organization's junior dance company. Now she'd earned a spot in the celebrated main company, some-

thing she'd dreamed about for years.

"I immediately started crying," said Hopkins, 23, who earned the honor in April. "I was in complete shock."

She was still crying when she called her mother, Jamel Hopkins-Quarles, after the audition.

"I thought something was wrong," said Hopkins-Quarles, who still lives in Orange. "She knew she had to say something fast because I was in panic mode. She said, 'Mom, I made it.' That's all she had to say."

Mom, dad Perry Quarles and little sister Kayla Quarles—along with plenty of other friends and family members—will see Hopkins and the rest of the Alvin Ailey dancers on the main stage at the Kennedy Center next month.

In fact, the Orange School of Performing Arts, where Hopkins trained throughout her childhood,

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EDUARDO PATINO

As a child, Demetia Hopkins sat, spellbound, in the audience each year as the Alvin Ailey dance company performed at the Kennedy Center. Next month, she will be on the stage.

DANCER: Orange County native is basking in spotlight

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has chartered a bus to ferry folks to the Feb. 5 performance.

Dancing onstage is magical, said Hopkins. But getting to do it for a hometown audience is something extra special, she said.

"To be performing for people I'm close with—my family, my friends, some people from the studio who haven't seen me dance in years—I'm really excited to be home," she said. "I'm ecstatic."

'GO WITH YOUR HEART'

Hopkins—Quarles was simply looking for an extracurricular activity for her daughter when she signed her up for a ballet class.

Hopkins, who was 5 or 6 at the time, loved it and went on to study hip-hop, jazz, lyrical dance, musical theater and even Irish step dance. The only style she couldn't quite master was tap, she said, adding that her 11-year-old sister excels at it.

She danced every day after school, on Saturdays and during the summers, often doing her homework while on the road.

She studied with the National Youth Ballet of Virginia, the Virginia School of the Arts and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, but most of her training took place at the Orange School of Performing Arts, which was founded by her uncle Ricardo Porter.

Porter said he never pushed his niece to pursue a career in dance, preferring instead for her to come to that decision on her own. Once she did, he stressed to her how much work it would take, but she never backed down, said Porter.

"I'd say, 'Every day, after school, you have to do X, Y and Z,' and she would go, 'OK,'" he said.

ITS SHOW TIME!

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's annual performance at the Kennedy Center takes place next month, but this time it features Orange County native Demetia Hopkins.

The New York-based modern-dance troupe will perform seven times between Feb. 1 and 6, and tickets range from \$30 to \$99.

The company's repertoire includes classics such as "Revelations" and "Cry" as well as newer works like "The Hunt" and "Anointed." For more information about each performance, visit kennedy-center.org.

Even now, she takes the bus home from New York on weekends and teaches the studio's advanced students.

"They know she's a big dancer, but to them she's Demetia," Porter said. "They love her."

Hopkins said she loves teaching and choreographing numbers for the students in Orange. She also hopes to inspire them to even bigger venues.

"If you're aspiring to do something in the art world, just because you're from the little town of Orange don't think that that training can't get you somewhere bigger," she said. "As long as you're passionate about it, go with your heart."

SUCCESS SINKING IN

Founded in 1958, the internationally acclaimed Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has performed in 71 countries on six continents and in just about every imaginable setting: at the Olympics and the White House, behind the Iron Curtain, in public parks—and

even on "Sesame Street."

The troupe has about 30 dancers, including new additions like Hopkins and veterans like D.C. native Renee Robinson, who has been with the company for 29 years.

In the fall, the troupe traveled to the United Kingdom and Israel for six weeks. It then returned for a five-week season in New York City, performing seven shows a week.

"Coming home to New York and seeing sold-out audiences and these people appreciate the work and know the company . . .," Hopkins said. "You can just feel the energy coming from the audience, and you just give it back."

Hopkins—Quarles said it was thrilling to see her daughter dance at the New York City Center. It will be even more exciting to see her move from the audience to the stage at the Kennedy Center next month, she said.

"To think of it coming full circle, it's just surreal," she said. "It's definitely a blessing. We're just extremely proud of her."

"It's amazing to see her dancing with the people you took her to see. She's one of them now," said Porter, who chartered a bus for all of Hopkins' friends, family and students from Orange. "We will all be there cheering."

The performances at the Kennedy Center will kick off a 24-city tour for the Alvin Ailey company that will take dancers coast-to-coast over the next four months.

Hopkins said she plans to enjoy every minute of it.

"It's slowly sinking in: This is what I've been trying to do my whole life. I'm being paid to dance," she said. "I'm so beyond happy."

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