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## Remembering Denise Jefferson

The dance world lost a giant on July 17 when Denise Jefferson passed away. I would venture to say that hundreds of thousands of dance lovers, who may not even know her name, have great reason to celebrate her memory.

Denise, the Director of the Ailey school, was one of the four pillars of the Ailey organization for decades. Along with Judith Jamison, Sylvia Waters and Masazumi Chaya, Denise provided a rock solid foundation for the organization. It is not surprising that over 85% of the dancers who currently perform with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater received training at the school. And many more of her students went on to important careers with other major dance companies.

Denise invested herself in every child in the school. She knew that by teaching children to dance, she was also teaching them to respect their bodies. This was a great gift for the young people in the school. She knew there were life lessons to be learned through dance that could benefit every child, not just the most talented who would eventually become professional dancers.

She was kind and caring, but she was also tough. She knew that the benefits of dance required discipline, hard work, and an endless striving for perfection. She would not compromise on quality and she would not tolerate dancers who did not work to their full potential.

But anyone who worked hard received her admiration and her support. Forever. Denise cared about her students long after they left her school.

Denise became a special friend of mine when I became Executive Director of the Ailey organization in 1991. She taught me a great deal about the various techniques that an Ailey dancer had to learn and about the history of African-American choreography.

We discussed ways to make the school more visible and better able to meet the needs of a very diverse student body.

But Denise was also my special personal tutor in all things African-American. She was an unembarrassed guide into the world of black customs and culture. I will always love her for the day she showed up at work, covered from head to toe in clothing. She quickly raised and lowered a sleeve to fulfill my request, rude as it was, to see what 'ash' was. I must admit the glimpse was so fast I didn't see what all the fuss was about!

Denise and I did not agree on everything. Her three-hour recitals in our non-air-conditioned studios in June seemed far too long to me. She disagreed. Every child who had worked so hard all year should have a chance to dance, she said. We argued about this for three years. Even after I left the Ailey organization Denise and I would argue about the length of recitals.

I will miss arguing with her.

And I will miss my special guide. I will miss her honesty and humor and grace and beauty.