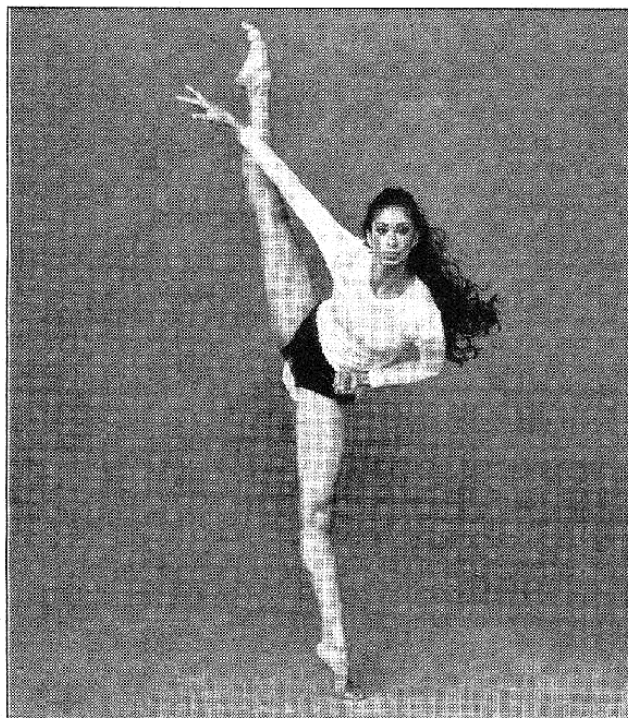


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Columbia graduate Alicia Graf Mack battled severe arthritis before rejoining the Alvin Ailey dance troupe last January.

How Mack got her groove back

By LEIGH WITCHEL

EVEN if you haven't been to an Alvin Ailey performance, chances are you've seen Alicia Graf Mack: Her photo, with one leg reaching skyward, is plastered on posters all over the city.

As Ailey director Robert Battle puts it, "Her legs go on and on — her feet can touch the heavens!" But while the tall (5-foot-10), elegant 33-year-old seems designed to dance, chronic injury made her quit — twice.

And each time, someone brought her back.

The California native grew up in Maryland and joined Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1996 while still in high school. For three years, she leapt closer and closer toward fame — until what first seemed like a minor cartilage tear in her knee took more than six months to heal.

The diagnosis was undifferentiated spondyloarthropathy, a kind of arthritis. Not only did it affect her joints, but se-

vere flare-ups even played havoc with her vision.

She left dancing and got her BA at Columbia University in 2003. Her arthritis subsided and she was getting back into shape, but was headed for an internship at J.P. Morgan. Dance legend Carmen de Lavallade intervened, telling her, "You can work at a bank at any time — you only have this time to dance."

And while she had one regret — "I had to give that signing bonus back to J.P. Morgan" — she returned to performing and, in 2005, auditioned for then-director Judith Jamison at Ailey.

"What took you so long?" Jamison asked her.

Mack performed for another three years — until another cartilage tear and flare-up of her arthritis. "When do you say when?" she wondered.

Quitting again, she moved to St. Louis to get her master's degree in nonprofit business management and to join Kirby Mack, a financial planner, whom she wed two years later. But

dance wouldn't leave her.

Webster University asked her to teach, and she did some guest performing. Word got out that she was back in shape and last January the Ailey troupe asked her to perform at City Center in honor of Jamison's final season.

"I stepped out onto the stage, and something just happened," Mack says. "I just knew that I was meant to be out there."

Her husband, a former pro football player, understood the importance of a dream. With his support, she returned to Ailey. These days, she shuttles between Manhattan and their home in Maryland on weekends. "I live on Amtrak," she says. By avoiding gluten and dairy, she's even been able to cut her arthritis medication in half.

She believes this is the best season she's ever had.

"I feel brave," Mack says. "No matter how much I fight against it, or if I have to take breaks, this is my life and is what I do."