

Head Turners: Dancer Courtney Celeste Spears Creates Her Own Rhythm

By: Anne McCarthy

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The Alvin Ailey company member talks to Shondaland about how she choreographed herself a new destiny during the most difficult time in her life.

In the ongoing Shondaland series Head Turners, we meet interesting women from every facet of life who are crushing it in their careers. From artists and tech mavens to titans of the boardroom, these women are breaking barriers, and they'll share how you can too. Courtney Celeste Spears knew she wanted to commit her life to dance at age 3. But determination alone wasn't enough to inoculate her from setbacks in the competitive world of professional dance. After early success at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's Ailey II Dance Company, [Spears](#) found herself out of work and in need of money. For more than a year, she toiled away at auditions during the day and worked odd jobs, including as an usher at Lincoln Center, unceremoniously watching her friends and colleagues from the audience.

Undaunted, Spears saw her misfortune as an opportunity to help others. She founded [ArtSea](#), a nonprofit organization aimed at bringing dance to the Caribbean, where Spears' mother was born. This summer, Spears is back at Lincoln Center, not directing audience members to their seats but dancing onstage with the Ailey company. Shondaland recently spoke with Spears about the value of good advice, surrounding herself with strong influences, and ballet shoes from Payless.

ANNE MCCARTHY: Many people hear the word "dancer" and think it's a glamorous life, but what is it really like?

COURTNEY CELESTE SPEARS: There are glamorous moments, but dance is hard work. I had a teacher when I was younger who told me straight up, "If you don't want to work hard, you don't want to dance." And I think that's the best advice. Dancers are amazingly hardworking, and our days are long, strenuous, and exhausting — physically and mentally.

AM: Did you always know you wanted to dance?

CCS: I started dancing when I was 3 years old. I always say that dance must have been a conversation that God and I had at a very young age because I don't know how you know what you'd love to do at age 3, but I knew as soon as I could walk that I wanted to move and be a dancer.

AM: When did you realize you could do it professionally?

CCS: I got to know what that meant as I got older in high school, but my love of dance started when I was 3. It was just my way of expression. My mom put me in classes — the typical ballet/tap/jazz type of track. She says she bought me my first ballet shoes from Payless and leotard and tights from Target, and I would not take it off. All the other kids were screaming when their parents left their first day, and I waved goodbye to my mom and just loved it. I went to a dance studio in Columbia, Maryland, called Arabesque [Dance] Studio.

AM: Who made an impact on you as a young dancer?

CCS: I had a teacher at the studio named Maureen Wheeler who saw that I took this very, very seriously [and] that it was more than just like a hobby for me. She changed my life and pushed me to go to the Baltimore School for the Arts, which is where I ended up really getting into [dance] and thinking: "Okay, this is what I want to do. This is the discipline." At Baltimore School for the Arts, I started dancing every single day, en pointe every day, and it kicked off my trajectory into the collegiate and then professional dance world. But I started at a very young age and had no idea what it meant. I just knew that I loved it.

AM: How did you get involved with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater?

CCS: I attended the Ailey/Fordham Bachelor of Fine Arts program after high school, and it was the perfect fit for me. I always valued my education just as much as my dancing. I love school. I love learning, whether it's in a classroom or in a dance studio. It was important for me to get my degree and finish my education; I always dreamed of dancing at this dance company, then owning my own business. I got into Ailey my senior year of college, so I hadn't graduated yet, and my mom was very supportive. She told me if I figure out a way to finish my degree, I can do Ailey too. So, I walked into my dean's office and told him, "Hey, I got this job. And I'm not leaving until we figure out a way to get me this degree." So, I ended up doing class on the road.

AM: Why was it so important to you to finish your degree?

CCS: For me, my education felt like my way to see the world in this big picture. I loved dancing. And I always wanted to be a dancer, but I always knew deep down in my mind, heart, and spirit that I wanted more as well. I like to think of myself as never the strongest person in the room, but I always wanted to be the most versatile. That's been my strength and my superpower. I've always had my own insecurities about my dancing. I don't think I was the brainiac in the classroom, either. I've had to work for everything.



AM: Why did you found ArtSea?

CCS: ArtSea came out of my gap year when I was between Ailey II and my next role. It was a really hard time. I went through college, and at that point, I thought: If you work hard and you do all the right things, life happens for you. But then you get older, and you realize timing is everything. I came off this amazing high of graduating college and being in Ailey II, then it was over. I hit this extreme pause when I was on an upward trajectory, and it was really hard. I started auditioning for other companies. And I was not getting hired. I started doing part-time work, temp work, ushering at Lincoln Center, babysitting. I was doing everything because I needed to make money, and it started to become scary because I just wasn't getting hired as a dancer. It started this downward spiral. But I remember sitting down and thinking I could maneuver. If I can't dance, I'm going to teach. I still have a lot to offer. I ended up pivoting and forming ArtSea to bring artistic and dance moments to the Bahamas. Now, we're in our sixth year and have hosted more than five workshops. We've brought down over 20 amazing different faculty members from New York City. We fundraised over \$50,000 to assist with students, offering them wonderful educational programs in dance. We recently started doing Mommy and Me dance classes for very young kids.

AM: Were you afraid of failing?

CCS: I was super-afraid of failing. I thought it would be embarrassing. What ended up being beautiful about that period is that I no longer had the time to dwell on my own problems or what I felt like were my shortcomings because I poured myself into something else, and it became my passion. I was able to give back. Of course, the way God has it and how life works out, soon after I was hired again as a dancer at Ailey.

AM: How did you mentally persevere during that "extreme pause"?

CCS: Family was very important. I became very connected to my faith. I felt like I prayed more in that year than I ever had. That's what kept me going. ArtSea also kept me going because it helped keep my love of dance alive when I wasn't getting hired at dance auditions. I started teaching again and falling in love with dance again. I almost love teaching as much as I love dancing. And when I started doing that, it plugged me back into why dance is what it is: It's a vessel to communicate with people. When I realized that, I took this pressure off myself. It was also about understanding that every valley is a testimony of some sort; you're going through a low time for a reason, though it can be hard to see it when you're in it.

AM: What's it like to be part of the New York City dance community?

CCS: The Ailey company is very close. I have to remind myself sometimes, "You're not with your friends right now; you're at work." We live together, we travel together, we laugh and see the world together. We really are a family; I don't want that to sound cheesy in any sense, but we actually are family. I do what I love with people I love every day. We also have a wide range of dancers in terms of seniority. We have a brand-new dancer who's in their first season, and then we have someone like Vernard Gilmore, who's in his 25th season at the company.

AM: What are the benefits of working with such a range of dancers?

CCS: You have these resources for information and little gems to pass down. I've been fortunate to work with a group of dancers who inspire me so much. They are so talented, and sometimes I'll get a chance where I'm not in a piece, I get to sit on the wings of the stage and just watch them and think, "Oh, my goodness. These are people I dreamed of dancing with, and they're so amazing and push me to be better." It makes me keep my standard very high for myself. We're supportive of each other; we're very open with our directors. -The dance world in New York is small, so I feel like as you grow in your career, it gets smaller and smaller. I met [American Ballet Theatre principal dancer] Isabella Boylston when I was auditioning, and I think we sat and talked for five minutes and went home. We reconnected the past year during the pandemic and really hit it off. She came to teach for me in the Bahamas last year.

AM: How does gratitude impact your life?

CCS: I'm still accepting that I worked hard to be in this dance world because sometimes I can't believe it. God landed me here, and I worked hard. Coming into adulthood is accepting that. But nine times out of 10, I'm still just grateful to be here.