

Berkeley News

Dance Prepared Him For The NFL. It Began With A Berkeley Summer Camp

By: Anne Brice

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As a sophomore at Oakland's Bishop O'Dowd High School in 2013, Camilo Eifler decided to try out for the football team. But there was a catch: He'd never actually played before. He hadn't even picked up a football.

But he decided to give it a shot. And surprisingly, the sport came to him quickly: By the end of his senior year, Eifler had 16 offers for college football scholarships. Now, he plays for the NFL's Atlanta Falcons.

His mom, UC Berkeley Professor Rachel Morello-Frosch, said the dance training he had in middle school, which began with Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp at age 11, helped prepare her son for the rigor and body awareness that football required.

"When you watch football, it looks like chaos," said Morello-Frosch. "But there's actually a lot of deep details happening — about body movement, eye movement, positioning. I think there are a lot of parallels to be made with how you implement a piece of choreography with how professional athletes implement a play."

[Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp](#), produced by the campus's performing arts center, [Cal Performances](#), is a six-week, full scholarship dance program for youth. Campers from ages 11 to 14 take classes in ballet, jazz, modern and West African dance, as well as in creative communication and personal development. At the end of the program, they give a final performance for the community.

The combination of intensive dance training and daily practice in peer-to-peer communication taught by experienced instructors, said Morello-Frosch, not only provided Eifler a foundation to thrive as a dancer, but also later as an athlete. And it gave him a stronger sense of self-confidence before he entered middle school, a challenging time in most people's lives.

"These kids are dancing all day," she said. "They're working on their bodies, their brains, their psyches, their emotions. They're building community. They're learning about accountability. It was a really transformative experience for him."

Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp, founded in 2002, is one of 10 AileyCamps across the country and one of two held on a college campus. It grew from Cal Performances' nearly 60-year relationship with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. This year, the national program of AileyCamp is celebrating its 35th anniversary.

Led by Director Patricia West and Associate Director Spencer Pulu, who goes by SPULU, Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp depends on its instructors to support and guide the young campers.

"The expectations for the kids are really high, and it's very demanding," said Morello-Frosch, "but the instructors are also really good at getting the kids to see that their well of talent and ability is deeper than they might initially think.

"They are just amazingly nice, warm, super cool. They have this great talent. They're highly skilled. They're experts in different areas that the camp emphasizes. They just really know how to bring out the best in the kids who participate in the camp."





This generous, yet demanding, teaching style got the attention of Rebecca Cheung, now the assistant dean of leadership development programs at Berkeley's School of Education.

Cheung got her start in education in the mid-1990s as a teacher in the Oakland Unified School District. She went on to become a principal and director in the Berkeley Unified School District, where, as principal of Longfellow Arts and Technology Middle School, she worked with the director of Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp to recruit students for the dance program.

"Every summer, we'd send students to AileyCamp," said Cheung. "We would set up an interview space for them in the spring. Our students would tell us how much they loved AileyCamp, how transformative it was."

Years later, in 2011, Cheung became director of Berkeley's Principal Leadership Institute, or PLI, a master's program in the School of Education that trains working teachers to be school leaders. (It's one of several leadership programs that she now oversees in her role as assistant dean.)

As director of the institute, Cheung said she was interested in finding new ways to provide "transformative learning experiences" for the graduate students that pushed them to think differently about what good teaching and learning looks like.

"I started to think about where the transformative spaces close to campus were, and then it just clicked for me: AileyCamp."

So Cheung contacted the director of Berkeley/Oakland Ailey Camp at the time, David McCauley. After months of discussion about how the two programs could work together, they formed a mutually supportive partnership. It's now in its 10th year.



In their work with Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp, the master's degree students are introduced to the history and vision of AileyCamp, then observe the teaching and learning process during the six weeks of camp and dress rehearsal. They also go to dance and communication classes and interview campers.

"They get to connect some of the theories of transformative teaching and learning that they're learning in their coursework to what they're seeing in AileyCamp," said Cheung.



In their coursework, said Cheung, students are introduced to the concept "warm demander," coined by educational scholar Lisa Delpit.

"A warm demander has expectations, and then supports their students to meet those expectations," said Cheung. "We ask them, 'How do we create warm and demanding environments? How do we encourage teachers to be warm demanders? What does it take?'"

"And then they go to AileyCamp, and they see it. It's everywhere."

As part of their coursework, students engage in the same dance practices that the campers do and soon realize how physically demanding the choreography is.

"They're not just cognitively understanding this concept of a teacher as a warm demander," said Cheung. "They're physically experiencing what it feels like. The embodiment creates a deeper level of understanding."

At the end of the summer, the graduate students compile their data and observations in final papers that document how the teaching and learning at AileyCamp is transformative. These documents, with sensitive information redacted, are then shared with AileyCamp for use in its fundraising efforts.

“It’s a great example of how two departments that have very little connection to each other can actually help each other accomplish their goals,” said Cheung. “Because honestly, we can’t imagine the Principal Leadership Institute without AileyCamp anymore. I hope we can inspire more interdepartmental collaborations of this type.”

At the end of July, campers will give a final performance in Zellerbach Hall on campus to celebrate their progress and showcase their new skills to their families and friends and anyone else who’d like to attend.

The final showcase performance, RISE: Reflect, Inquire, Strive and Excel, will take place on Thursday, July 25 at 7 p.m. in Zellerbach Hall. The performance is free and open to the public. Tickets will be available in advance starting on July 16, with a limit of four tickets per person, online or at the [ticket office](#). Tickets may also be available at the door the night of the performance, based on availability.

Reserve tickets for this year’s final performance and learn more about Berkeley/Oakland AileyCamp on [Cal Performances’ website](#).