

Inside Philanthropy

Alvin Ailey: How a Historic Dance Organization Rakes In Philanthropic Support

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As a Black New York native, I first heard the name Alvin Ailey when I was very young, even as someone not necessarily inclined toward the performing arts. The pioneering African American dancer, choreographer and activist came up in Texas in the violent Jim Crow South, where he recalled seeing members of the Klan. Eventually, he found his way to California to work on his craft, and then New York City.

After the death of his mentor Lester Horton in 1953, Ailey became director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater and began to choreograph his own works. He performed in four Broadway shows, including “House of

Flowers” and “Jamaica.” Then, in 1958, he founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his own vision of a company with the goal of preserving the uniqueness of the African American cultural experience. Ailey went on to launch what is now known as the Ailey School in New York in 1969 to cultivate and nurture the next generation of dancers. He passed away in 1989.

Today, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and associated Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation continue to honor the legacy and work of their namesake. The foundation provides Ailey education and outreach programs through the Ailey School, arts education programs, and the Ailey Extension, committing to bringing dance into the lives of people of all backgrounds. Along the way, the institution has received funding from a mix of individual donors, private foundations and corporate sponsors including Home Depot Foundation, Reginald F. Lewis Foundation, Pincus Family Foundation, and, last but certainly not least, the Prudential Foundation.

IP recently caught up with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Executive Director Bennett Rink and Lata Reddy, chair of the Prudential Foundation and senior vice president of inclusive services at Prudential Financial. In our conversations, we found out more about Ailey’s mission and work, how it has raked in support from a range of donors, and the long-running philanthropic connection between Ailey and Prudential.

A dance pioneer’s legacy

Once an aspiring actor, Bennett Rink found his way to Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in the mid-1990s, when he first signed on as manager of special events. He’s been executive director of the organization since 2013. “Ailey left a roadmap for his legacy in terms of his company, which was always committed to commissioning choreographers of different backgrounds,” Rink began. Ailey was also a strong believer in education, studying romance languages and writing at UCLA, Los Angeles City College, and San Francisco State in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

In life, Alvin Ailey created the Ailey School, as well as camp programs, doing so at a time, Rink said, when most performing arts organizations weren’t doing this kind of community building and educational outreach. Ailey’s lifelong vision also embraced philanthropy, including what it would take to find the resources to create this kind of far-reaching programming. Today, Alvin Ailey Dance builds on this mission. “[We’re] firmly rooted in the idea that dance came from the people and should be delivered back to the people. And in order to do that, we need philanthropic support,” Rink said.

Rink breaks the organization’s current work into five pillars, the first of which is, unsurprisingly, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, the original company that Ailey founded in 1958 that continues to tour. A second company, Ailey II, comprises younger dancers who perform in smaller cities, as well as at college and universities, developing new audiences and providing a pathway for their performing careers. The third bucket, the Ailey School, trains dancers from age three all the way through the emerging professional stage. Many of these students are on scholarships, keeping with the theme that there should be no barriers for talented young people who want to perform.

Then there's the Ailey Arts in Education and Community Programs (AIE), which engages in school and community outreach programs like AileyCamp, a free, six-week summer day camp operating in 10 cities across the country where young people ages 11–14 learn to dance and explore their creativity. This year's AileyCamp celebrates 35 years of programming, and kicked off at the start of July in the Bronx, in collaboration with Children's Aid Society, and in Newark, with New Jersey Performing Arts Center and Newark Public Schools. The Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey and Ailey himself created this program in Missouri in 1989, ultimately becoming the last initiative before his passing.

On the other end of the spectrum, AIE also runs AileyDance for Active Aging, which brings dance programming to older adults in community centers and in residential homes for independent and assisted living. AIE works in a range of public and charter schools, as well, conducting week-long residencies in cities where Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performs on tour.

Getting funders on board

What's made Alvin Ailey so successful on the fundraising front? For one thing, it rakes in support from a broad mix of individual donors, corporate sponsors, foundations, government agencies and fundraising galas — mainly in New York and in Washington, D.C. "I like to say that Ailey has a very diversified portfolio, if you will, in terms of contributed income," Rink said. At the end of the 2023 fiscal year, Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation held nearly \$260 million in assets. Rink mentioned a number of loyal individual donors, some of whom are on the board of directors, as well as committed corporate sponsors, like Prudential. He also said foundations like Ford have been "instrumental" through the years.

On the individual donor level, Ailey has received strong support from billionaire Elaine Wynn, a significant arts patron. Last decade, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater cut the ribbon on the new Elaine Wynn & Family Education Wing at the Joan Weill Center For Dance in New York City. "When you have those individual donors who come forward, it's easier, I think, to appeal to foundations and other sources because they've signaled that this is an important organization and we need to help support its growth," Rink said.

Prudential Foundation traces its relationship with Ailey Dance all the way back to when Alvin Ailey himself was still alive and running the company during the 1980s, said Prudential's Lata Reddy, who serves on the board of trustees of Ailey. Her predecessor was invited to join the board, which at the time was looking to bring on more corporate representation and others who could help with fundraising. "We had a brilliant visionary in the form of Mr. Ailey, who created this company and was doing incredible things. But the business model wasn't sustainable at that moment," Reddy said.

Prudential Foundation helped build out a strong board, sending Ailey on the path to financial success and stability. Since then, the corporate funder has stepped up in key moments of need, including supporting AileyCamp as a lead donor. It's a relationship now that has lasted more than three and a half decades. Reddy says their partnership is rooted in a shared purpose and mission. From a corporate responsibility standpoint, Reddy said Prudential Foundation is particularly interested in creating community in its back yard of New Jersey, especially around its Newark headquarters. Ailey was ahead of the curve in running innovative arts education programs and Prudential wanted to bring those resources to its hometown.

"Ultimately, our goal is to help ensure that more people in more places are financially secure. There are a lot of things that ladder into financial security... We take our role very seriously as an anchor institution in the city and take an expansive view of the things we get engaged in. The Ailey programs for young people are a great way to cover so many of these things," Reddy said.

Looking ahead, Rink says that Ailey is committed to commissioning new work for choreographers, extending the artistic excellence of the company, and providing scholarships and housing stipends for performers coming to an expensive city like New York. Rink also wants to keep digging into AileyCamps and providing strong programming for the next generation. "It's almost an ecosystem of the performances, the education, [and] the outreach — and it all works together."