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At Newark's AileyCamp, dance is just one form of expression

By: Steve Strunsky

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Cherish Jones sat pasting together body parts she had clipped from magazines to form a ballet dancer doing a [plie](#), a move familiar even to non-fans that involves bending both knees outward and dipping straight down. Cherish, 12, was working on an interdisciplinary project at [AileyCamp](#), a six-week program based at Newark Arts High School, where she and 65 other campers study dance and visual arts. The collage was meant to reinforce both forms of expression.

“Before I did this picture, I felt like art had nothing to do with dance,” Cherish said. “I know art is more using your hands and drawing, and dance is more of using your body. But now, when I put it together, it made me realize that you could put art and dance together, and it could really mean something.”

Newark’s program is one of [10 AileyCamps around the country](#), the first one founded in Kansas City, Missouri, in August 1989 by the pioneering choreographer, dancer and dance educator [Alvin Ailey](#), who died that year at age 58. Black, gay and raised by a single mother, Ailey grew up in rural Texas during the Depression and Jim Crow eras before founding the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and becoming one of the world’s most acclaimed choreographers. Newark’s AileyCamp began in 2011 as one of the ways Newark’s 60,000 school-age children and teens spend their summers. The camp is held in partnership with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, which will host a performance by campers on Aug. 2 in NJPAC’s Victoria Hall.

Its other partner is the Newark Public School district, which donates the camp’s daily instructional space at Arts High School, an ornate art deco building completed in 1931, the same year Ailey was born. The camp is free, funded by [Prudential Financial](#) and the [Fund II Foundation](#). Through instruction in dance, music, visual arts and personal development, the camp helps kids ages 11–14 explore their creativity while developing self-confidence in a warm, respectful, and trusting environment, in groups of about 15 campers each. West African, jazz and ballet are some of the leading genres.

Ballet instructor Ana Sofia Reynoso led AileyCampers through exercises.

The one boy in the class, Freddy Penafiel, is at left. Steve Strunsky | NJ Advance Media For NJ.com The camp is not intended as a feeder for the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater. But that does happen. A [former Newark camper, Christopher Taylor](#), is one of three AileyCamp alumni nationwide to perform with the dance theater’s premier troupe. In a personal development class, the instructor used role-playing to foster empathy in campers, helping them to understand other people’s “perspectives,” a term that provides the theme for this summer’s session.



“There’s nothing wrong with taking off your hat for the person who doesn’t have the front row,” the instructor, Natasha Hill, told the class. A camper in a green felt hat, Kayla Astuquilha, 12, a soon-to-be 8th grader at Newark’s First Avenue School, recited one of the AileyCamp’s affirmations: “I will not use the word can’t to define my possibilities.” The sound of dun-duns and djembe drums thundered through the school auditorium during a West African percussion class when campers played a piece known as “Takademe” using sticks and bare hands. The art instructor in Cherish’s class, Duron Jackson, said the point of the collage was to help students understand commonalities of performance and visual art forms that they might have considered unrelated in that they were forms of artistic expression. Viewed jointly, Jackson said, the two media can shed light on each other.



“The artwork reinforces the dance movement and vice versa,” said Jackson, who lives in Newark and teaches art at the Harlem Visual Academy in Manhattan during the school year. It’s a concept Cherish understood. “When I look at it, I know that this face isn’t mine,” Cherish, who’ll start 8th grade this fall at Newark’s Philips Academy charter school, said of her collage. “But I picture it in my head, and then it’s my face. And the body shapes and all the features give you the same feeling that you feel in your legs and your arms.”

Once each student finishes, Jackson said he’ll make a collage of the collages, “and hopefully we’ll have, like, a giant wall full of dance moves.” Cherish’s mother, Alisha Jones, said her daughter studied ballet, jazz and tap before attending AileyCamp, but that learning West African dance has helped her grow as a dancer. “I’ve seen Cherish just mature in her dance because now they have

opened her up to different styles,” Jones said.

Dance training or experience is not a prerequisite to attend. The application process for summer 2024 begins in early spring. For information go to www.alvinailey.org/aileycamp

Torens Johnson, a dance professor at Texas State University in San Marcos and AileyCamp’s national deputy director, said students in every city are alike in their “energy, energy, energy.” But one thing that distinguishes the Newark community is its embrace of dance as a form of expression for anyone. “I think it’s because they’re so exposed to so many cultural opportunities,” said Johnson, who led a visitor on a tour of the camp this week with its co-directors, Sherece Hill and Ronnie Carney. Johnson noted one thing in particular, compared to other AileyCamps, was that “Newark has more boys.” That said, girls still made up most Newark campers — something that didn’t bother Freddy Penafiel, who said he felt special as one of the few boys in the camp.

Freddy, 13, who’ll be in 8th grade this fall at Newark’s First Avenue School, is getting his first formal dance instruction as an AileyCamper, though he already liked to dance. “Dancing makes me feel good about myself because I can express different emotions through movement,” he said. “It’s very creative.” His ballet instructor, Ana Sofia Reynoso, said Freddy is the kind of student who inspires her as a teacher.

“He tries so hard, and he’s so creative that you just want to encourage him to do more,” said Reynoso, a New York City-based dancer and choreographer. “I’m from Mexico, and it’s so nice to see a Latino boy just doing it and being praised by his family.” For Freddy, dancing isn’t just about feeling the music but surrendering to it.

“To dance,” he said, “I let the music come into me.”