

Chalkbeat

NEWARK

Newark's Aileycamp Inspires Students To Find Their Voice Through Dance, Performance, And Lessons

By: Jessie Gomez

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“Don’t forget to count,” Matthew Hill, a percussion teacher at Newark’s AileyCamp said as he used his bare hands to thump a djembe, a West African drum.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, slapped Hill in a fast tempo as the loud thuds echoed throughout the Arts High School auditorium.

Freddy Penasiel, a 14-year-old rising freshman, used drumsticks to tap on a dunun, a cylindrical drum that is part of the West African bass drum family, creating deep, hollow bangs. He and other students, who were arranged in three rows on the auditorium stage, followed their instructor in a call-and-response style.

Boom! The students hit their drums with their left hand. Boom! They hit their drum with their right hand. After every tap to their drum, those in the back row clicked their drumsticks together to form an X with their arms.

Boom, click, boom, boom, click.

Penasiel is one of five boys who attend the six-week AileyCamp camp based at Arts High School, where a total of 95 students aged 11-14 rotate between different dance and music classes during the weekday.

At the camp, students like Penasiel bang on drums, move to West African rhythms, and learn to never doubt themselves. Students in other sessions learned to twirl and dance to instrumental music while others recited AileyCamp’s daily affirmations such as “I will not use the word ‘can’t’ to define my possibilities” to build confidence and self-esteem.

This is Penasiel’s second and last year at the Newark camp, which began in 2011 and is one of 10 AileyCamps around the country, the first one founded in 1989 in Kansas City, Missouri by dancer, director, and choreographer Alvin Ailey. The renowned dancer believed that every child, especially those from diverse backgrounds, deserved a high-quality experience in the arts, said Nasha Thomas, AileyCamp’s national director and Ailey Arts In Education Master Teacher.



The program is hosted by Newark Public Schools where this summer, the district offered dozens of academic and enrichment courses for thousands of city students.



Thomas, a former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater performer raised by a single mother in the New York City housing projects, says the arts isn’t just about dancing or performing, “it’s about building a strong sense of self.” The program is available to any student, regardless of their dance and performing arts experience, and aims to inspire students with similar backgrounds as her, Thomas said.

“With AileyCamp, students get to explore their own voice. It helps them tap into their creative voice, and actually learn to have a voice,” Thomas said. “They get to explore their likes and dislikes and for a young person that’s trying to decide who they are, what they want to be, we present them with a plethora of role models through the instructors and lessons.”

A soon-to-be Newark School of Global Studies student, Penasiel proudly donned a purple shirt with the number “35” on the back, signaling AileyCamp’s 35th year offering the free program. Penasiel, whose family is from Ecuador, says the exposure to different cultures, music styles, and activities inspired him to come back.

“My very, very first day of camp, I did not know anybody, and I was literally sitting alone. And when I got to the classes, I’m like, how can she move like this? How can she do that? And then I learned it and I liked it,” said Penasiel, about his instructors who introduced dance moves on his first day.

Across the state, nearly all students, 99.4%, have access to arts instruction as part of the curriculum, according to the 2021 New Jersey Arts Education Census Report. There are 7,220 students in 20 schools without access to arts education, the analysis found. In Essex County, 78% of students are enrolled in an arts program, according to the report.

Gaia Empestan is a first-year student at AileyCamp. The 13-year-old decided to attend the program after taking up dance following an injury as a gymnast. For her, AileyCamp allowed her to hone in on what she felt were “the more fun parts” of gymnastics.

“It was like a way for me to, like, also do the parts of gymnastics I liked without all of the fear of getting hurt. And it’s just really fun,” said Empestan, a South Orange middle school student.

She’s part of the camp’s Group M, which the students named the Mighty Miracle Makers, and on Tuesday, she listened closely to her ballet instructor, Ana Sofia Reynoso, as she guided a group of girls to stand in first position, a basic ballet move that involves standing with your feet together, toes pointed forward, and heels touching.



Across the hall from ballet, students in a creative communication class created scratch art, an activity using a tool to scratch away the dark ink layer on a foil surface to reveal colors. Students were tasked with creating drawings inspired by this year’s camp theme: excellence.

Thomas, the national director, says the camp isn’t meant for students to become professional dancers. However, some do.

Take former camper Christopher Taylor, who says the program launched his career in professional dance.

In 2022, Taylor became the second member to join the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater after participating in the Newark AileyCamp in 2011. More than 10 years later, his dream of performing worldwide came true. A “surreal” feeling for which he thanks his camp and Ailey School instructors.

He also thanks his grandmother, who exposed him to house and dance music in Newark as a young boy. The Arts High School graduate remembers dancing in Military Park and fueling his passion for dance through the AileyCamp.

“I feel like, at a young age, all those cookouts, all those house music festivals I was introduced to, I learned how to free my body without any thought,” Taylor said. “It wasn’t like I had to learn how to plant my feet. That’s the first movement. It was just okay, this is a sense of movement now, how can I make this mine?”

This year’s Newark AileyCamp culminates with a final performance at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on Aug. 8. Both Penasiel and Empestan will take the big stage and perform alongside their peers. This is Penasiel’s final performance and he says he feels emotional when he remembers it’s his last year in camp. But he wants to continue dancing and performing and plans to attend Montclair State University for its dance program after graduating high school.

“In my family, they don’t consider dance as an actual career,” Penasiel said. “But I want to follow my passion.”