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Southfield Teen Dances Her Way To The Big Apple

By: Susan Thwing
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It was a summer to talk about for Nylah Taylor, a 15-year-old dance prodigy from Southfield, who secured a coveted scholarship to attend the Ailey Experience NYC workshop. This prestigious program, hosted in early August by the Ailey Extension in New York City, is a dream come true for the talented teen who has been dancing since she was 3.

Taylor, a sophomore at Cass Technical High School, joined 19 other scholarship recipients from around the world in the weeklong dance intensive. From Aug. 5-9, Taylor, the daughter of Regina and Norman Taylor, trained in various dance styles, including ballet, jazz, hip-hop and contemporary, all under the guidance of some of the most esteemed dance professionals in the industry. The program culminated in a showcase at the Ailey Citigroup Theater, where Taylor and her peers performed the choreography they had spent the week mastering.

The five-day experience was hard work, but worth it, Taylor said.

"We took classes all day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., learning everything from ballet to West African dance. ... I gained so much knowledge, not just about technique, but how to connect my body movements and convey emotion through dance," she said. "I came away with having a different approach to dance, living through it and showing how much you love it through emotion in your dance."

The scholarship, which covers the entire workshop enrollment fee, was awarded to Taylor after she impressed instructors during the Ailey Experience Detroit, a two-day program held at Wayne State University. The Ailey Experience tour coincided with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's United States Tour, which visits approximately 20 cities, including Atlanta, Chicago, Washington DC, and more each spring.

Jennifer Hawkins, the artistic director of The Zone Dance Center in Southfield where Taylor trains, said she wasn't surprised by her student's achievement.

"Nylah is a multi-dimensional dancer who is well-versed in all dance methods. When she's on stage, she has this special spark. She's always the first one in class and the last to leave, constantly striving to improve," Hawkins said. "Nylah comes from a very supportive family. They support her and they support the school. I think that is where her strength comes from."

Levi Marsman, one of the Detroit workshop's instructors and a former Ailey II company member, noted Taylor's dedication.

"One of the things I noticed right away about Nylah is her eagerness to showcase herself and commit to giving 100 percent — all while having fun. She was always listening, making the most of those hours in class," he said.

Taylor's passion for dance is palpable and she said she's determined to continue pursuing it as a profession.

"This experience is such an eye-opener," she said. "I'm going to come away with a different approach to dance, really living through it and showing how much I love it through emotion."

She said she aspires to dance in college and, perhaps, one day, join the ranks of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Her final performance in New York featured both hip-hop and contemporary styles, showcasing the breadth of her training.

Taylor said the experience in New York yielded more than honing her craft in dance; she is excited about the dance itself and the connections she's made with other dancers from around the world.

"Dancing with people from areas you don't know, you learn so much and make such great connections. Everyone should have a chance to experience this, not just dancers, but everyone," she said.

