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A Long Road to a Dream

By: Alyssa Vaughn

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An Ailey dance program (in NYC) is worth any sacrifice for a teen and her mother



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NATALYA BAINE *on watching her daughter Nasya perform*



PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Natalya and Nasya Baine have been making the trip to New York City from Boston four times a week over the past few months so that Nasya can train at the renowned Ailey School. Stories of relentlessly dedicated dancers and the families who support them no matter the cost are commonplace at Ailey.

By Alyssa Vaughn
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

By now, Natalya Baine and her daughter Nasya have their routine down pat.

Four days a week, Natalya wakes up, cooks lunch and dinner, then stores the meals in to-go containers as 17-year-old Nasya packs up and gets dressed. They load their belongings into their car — the food, Nasya's dance shoes and clothes, Natalya's homework for her master's program — make a quick stop at BJ's for gas, call Natalya's mother to say a prayer, and are on the road by late morning.

By 4:30, they've arrived at their destination: the Joan Weill Center in Manhattan, home of the renowned Ailey School, where Nasya is enrolled in the company's pre-professional school year program. She takes ballet and modern classes at the Ailey studios for three hours, then returns to the car, where her mother has been waiting. Natalya puts the keys in the ignition. They're back home in Dorchester by midnight.

This has been the drill for Natalya and Nasya every Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday (except they start earlier on Saturday) since Nasya began the Ailey program last September. Financially and logistically, a move, even temporarily, to New York City for the dura-

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tion of the program was out of the picture for the Baines, so instead, they super-commute for dance class. Each week, they spend about 32 hours driving to or from New York City so Nasya can spend about 14 hours training with Ailey.

"I love seeing the reactions on people's faces when I tell them," Nasya said with a laugh.

When Nasya was offered a spot in Ailey's pre-professional program for this school year, both she and Natalya knew they'd do everything in their power to ensure she could attend. Founded by dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey in 1958, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is one of the most celebrated dance companies in the world. Its sweeping repertory, which consists of nearly 300 works, includes some of modern dance's most iconic pieces, including the company's signature work, "Revelations."

Choreographed by Ailey himself, "Revelations" is a rich tapestry of African American spirituals, ballet, and modern and jazz dance inspired by Ailey's upbringing in the Baptist church. It's included in the company's touring performances at the Boch Center Wang Theater, which began Thursday night and continue through Sunday.

It's "Revelations" that first spoke to an 11-year-old Nasya. While she had taken a few years of dance at Jamaica Plain's OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center and was familiar with Alvin Ailey, after doing a research project about him during a summer camp, "Revelations" was like nothing she had ever seen before. She was struck by the piece's grace and emotional intensity, which contrasted sharply with the complicated, trick-heavy dancing she was used to seeing on her social media.

"What I like most about Ailey is that you can see someone lift their hand for a count of eight, and they'll capture you right then and there," she said.

Hooked, Nasya set her sights on a career in concert dance, with a job with the Ailey company as her ultimate goal. She worked closely with her dance mentor (Shaumba-Yandje Dibia, founding artistic director of OrigiNation), enrolled in Boston Arts Academy as a dance major, and even got a taste of Ailey through a brief summer intensive. Natalya watched her daughter's evolution from the wings, and remembers one particular performance where it felt like everything clicked into place.



PHOTOS BY PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Natalya Baine peered into Jamaica Plain's OrigiNation Cultural Arts Center as her daughter Nasya took a dance class. Natalya is pursuing a master's and brings her work while she waits in the car when Nasya is busy at Ailey in New York City. Below, Nasya at OrigiNation.



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"I was like, 'Oh my gosh, is this my child?' " she said. "She just looked so stunning and confident, like it was just natural."

Still, she was a little skeptical when Nasya told her she wanted to audition for Ailey's New York-based yearlong pre-professional program. Would her daughter really be willing to forgo normal teenage life for this dream?

Nasya dithered until the last possible moment. ("If pacing was a person, that was me," she said.) But when the morning of the audition came, she marched into Natalya's bedroom.

"Mama, do we have time to make it to the audition today?"

Natalya checked the clock:

10:30. The audition was in Manhattan that afternoon. "Hop in the car," she said. "Let's go."

Stories like Natalya and Nasya's are commonplace at Ailey, of relentlessly dedicated dancers and the families who support them at all costs. Company member Christopher Taylor, for one, wouldn't have gotten his start at Ailey without a push from his grandmother (she found the application for an Ailey summer program that he had abandoned in his backpack, thinking he'd opt for basketball camp instead).

"She saw the paper and said, 'Alvin Ailey!'" Taylor said. "No,



you're going to do this." He went, then received a scholarship to the Ailey School. For Taylor's entire first year at the school, his grandmother rode the bus with him from North New Jersey to the studio and back.

In spite of the sacrifices it required, Taylor always knew Ailey was the place for him. "It was the first example of Black men and women dancing that I ever saw," he said, remembering when a teacher showed his class a DVD of Ailey performances. "They were storytelling with their bodies; they were celebrating us." To be able to do that for a living, he says, is a

blessing.

That's the prize Nasya is chasing. It's why she left her school and enrolled in online classes and gave up sleeping in and seeing friends on Saturdays. It's why Nasya squeezes in all her studying for her master's degree while Nasya is in the studio; why she carefully saves up to pay for gas and tolls; and why she drives on endless loop, even when she's so exhausted that she has to roll the windows all the way down so the chill keeps her alert at the wheel.

This weekend, Taylor and the company are in Boston to showcase Ailey's dynamic, stirring works. As they take to the stage,

Nasya and Natalya will be somewhere between New York and here, making their way back from another day at the Ailey School.

In her classes at Ailey, Nasya says, one concept that's emphasized is partnership — an Ailey artist thinks of everything in their space as a partner, from the air that suspends them on a jump, to the floor that catches them when they land. In other words: Every movement is the work of a team. For aspiring young dancers like Nasya, that couldn't be more true.

Alyssa Vaughn is a writer and editor in Somerville.