



At Newark AileyCamp, young dancers learn ‘the power within yourself’

By: Steve Strunsky

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AileyCamper Austin Fisher stood in a rehearsal room [at Newark Arts High School](#) with dozens of eyes on her, held the barre with her right hand, arched her left arm above her head, and ever so gracefully bent backward at the waist.

Austin, 12, a seventh-grader from South Orange, had just executed what’s known in dance parlance as a back cambre and bras en couronne.

The combination earned her the applause of 20 fellow campers and praise from the national director of [AileyCamp](#), a network of 10 summer dance programs around the country named for the renowned dancer, choreographer and educator [Alvin Ailey](#).

“How did that feel on your back?” asked AileyCamp director, [Nasha Thomas](#), who danced with Ailey’s troupe from 1986 to 1998. “That’s how my back used to be — years ago.”

Thomas, a Queens native who lives in South Plainfield, was visiting the camp in advance of an Aug. 6 performance by AileyCampers at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, an annual event at NJPAC that caps the local camp’s six-week summer program.

The free camp’s partners are Arts High School, the Newark Board of Education, and NJPAC. Funding for the \$250,000 annual program comes mainly from Prudential Financial and the Victoria Foundation, both based in Newark, plus additional donors. There are 85 campers in Newark this year.



The first AileyCamp was founded in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1989, the year Ailey died. Newark’s program began in 2011. Other camps are in New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Seattle, Chicago, Miami, Berkeley, California, and Kansas City, Kansas.



Dance genres include West African, modern, jazz and ballet. But beyond dance, the camp also offers classes in music, visual arts and personal development, helping kids ages 11 to 14 explore their creativity while developing self-confidence in a warm, respectful, and trusting environment. Classes are broken into groups of 15 to 20 campers each.

Dance training or experience is not required to attend. The application process for summer 2024 begins in early spring. Visit the [AileyCamp website](#) for more information.

Thomas’ sister, Devone DeNose, happens to be director of visual and performing arts for the Newark Public Schools district. DeNose was hired as an assistant principal at Arts High School after the AileyCamp program began there in 2011. DeNose later became principal of the school, before moving on to her district-wide job.

“It absolutely was a coincidence,” said DeNose, who was at the school on Tuesday. “So it was amazing that we were able to work together.”

On the stage of the Arts High School auditorium, Camila Leon-Gonzalez and Aracely Elise Mestres, who both live in Newark, were among two dozen campers in green AileyCamp T-shirts practicing modern dance steps accompanied by a percussionist.

Aracely Elise Mestres, 15, who also lives in Newark, finished 8th grade in June at the district’s Benjamin Franklin School and will stay at Arts High this fall, where she’ll transition from AileyCamper to member of the freshman class.



“Most dancers here at AileyCamp, and dancers all across the world, find dance as a way to express themselves,” Aracely said.

“I love all dance styles,” she added. “I love jazz. It’s such a fun, funky way to express yourself.”

Camila, who’ll be a freshman at [St. Vincent Academy](#) in Newark, said jazz was also her favorite dance form, because of the improvising involved. She said learning individual steps or moves to incorporate them into an improvised sequence is a lesson that transcends dance and can be applied to almost any situation in life.

“And when you’re dancing,” Camila added, “it’s not only about dance, because you learn discipline, you learn how to be confident in yourself. So when you go outside in the world, the real world, your confidence is way higher. You know how to walk. You have power within yourself.”

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