Nasha Thomas

From a Queens Dance Studio to Ailey's *Cry*, and a Life Lifting Young Dancers

Her mother signed her up for dance class in Queens. Alvin Ailey chose her for his company. She danced *Cry*, his gift to "all Black women everywhere," with her own mother in the audience. Today she makes sure thousands of young people get the same chance she did.

By: Anthony Cave-Harris

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Johannesburg, 1997. She asked Alvin to guide her.

In June 1997, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater landed in South Africa for the first time. Apartheid had only just ended. The company had never been allowed to perform there before, and for 15 days its dancers taught in schools and community halls from Soweto to Pretoria before they ever stepped on a stage.

On opening night at Johannesburg's Civic Theater, the solo was Cry, the 16-minute dance Alvin Ailey had made as a tribute to Black women. The woman dancing it was Nasha Thomas, an 11-year veteran of the company. TIME magazine was in the house, and its reporter wrote that her performance drew "a thunderous ovation."

Ailey had died eight years earlier. Thomas told TIME she still talked to him anyway: "There are times on stage when I speak to Alvin before I perform and ask him to guide me."

That sentence holds her whole life. A girl from Queens who was taught, guided and believed in, who grew into a woman on one of the world's great stages, and who then turned around and spent the next three decades doing the guiding herself. Today she is the National Director of AileyCamp, the free summer program that in 2026 serves middle schoolers in nine American cities, including Newark, New Jersey.

Dance Mogul Magazine first sat down with her in 2013. This feature goes further. It is written for one reader in particular: the young girl who has never seen herself in a dance history book. Here is a woman who started exactly where you are.

"There are times on stage when I speak to Alvin before I perform and ask him to guide me."

- Nasha Thomas, to TIME, Johannesburg, 1997

A Queens Studio and a Mother Who Showed Up

Nasha Thomas's dance story starts with a decision her mother made. As Thomas told DMM in 2013, her mother put her in dance school in Queens, at the studio run by Bernice Johnson. What started as a class became a second home. As she got older and better, she said, she basically lived at the studio, Monday through Sunday.

It was no ordinary neighborhood studio. Bernice Johnson, who was married to the jazz musician Budd Johnson, was known for training phenomenal dancers, and Thomas grew up surrounded by proof. Ben Vereen had come through the studio. So had the choreographer Michael Peters, who would go on to stage Michael Jackson's most famous videos. Through that studio family she met Debbie Allen. Kevin Iega Jeff, who later founded Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, trained there too; she knew him as a young child. When she listed her early inspirations for DMM, she named Bernice Johnson, Judith Jamison, Alvin Ailey, Michael Peters and Kevin Iega Jeff.

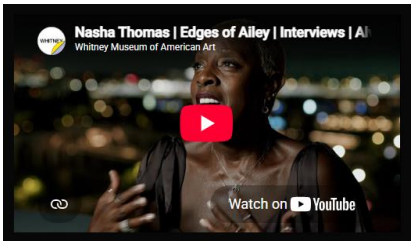
Think about what that means for a little girl. The people on television were not strangers. They had stood in the same studio, on the same floor, and some of them came back to visit. Greatness was not far away. It was one room over.



Her mother was the constant. "Supportive" is the word Thomas used again and again, and she said her mother was always the first one at her performances, with her grandmother right there too. Her mother also made one thing non-negotiable:

school. Education, Thomas said, was always stressed at home. She knew she was going to college.

Bernice Johnson taught one more lesson that Thomas still passes on. In her studio, students did not say "I can't." They said "I don't know how." As Thomas explained it to DMM, saying you can't means you will never do it, but saying you don't know how means you can always learn. She told DMM she says the same thing to the children she works with today.



Performing Arts, a Presidential Honor and a Long Way to Dallas

Thomas auditioned for New York's High School of Performing Arts, the public school that inspired Fame, and was accepted as a dance major. She kept her seven-day studio schedule on top of it. If grades slipped, she said, the adults at the Johnson studio would not let dancing take the place of schoolwork, and balancing the two came fairly easily.

In 1980 she was named a U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts, one of the highest national honors a graduating high school artist can receive. Decades later, the Presidential Scholars Foundation invited her back as a speaker for its anniversary celebration.

Then she left New York. At Southern Methodist University in Dallas she majored in dance and minored in English. For the first time she was fully on her own: getting herself up, getting to class, keeping her grades where they needed to be. She told DMM she felt a responsibility to the school, which paid for her education, and to her family, who could not have afforded it. She took full advantage of the opportunity. The commitment, focus and dedication that dance had taught her, she said, carried straight into everything else.

Here is a detail most biographies leave out. Her first real professional paycheck in dance did not come from a ballet company. It came from the Dallas Cowboys. While she was at SMU she auditioned for the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders and made the squad. She remembered earning about $15 a game, with a little more for extra appearances as part of the travel group. "That's when I was a professional," she told DMM. Every career starts somewhere. Hers started on a football sideline.

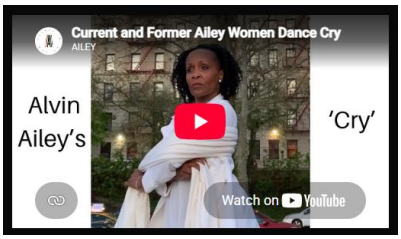
1986: Alvin Ailey Says Yes

After college Thomas began auditioning, and in 1986 she was invited into the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater by Alvin Ailey himself. She was one of the last dancers he hired. He died in December 1989.

She still remembers the audition. In a 2025 interview for the Whitney Museum's Alvin Ailey and Me project, she said the moment she auditioned for him remains vivid in her mind. What stayed with her even longer was the kind of person he was. "Working with Alvin Ailey was just the best," she told NBC News in 2024. "Out of 30 dancers he had a way of making everybody feel special. He loved people. He was a very giving person." To the Whitney she put it in five words: "Mr. Ailey was a giver."

After Ailey's death, Judith Jamison took over as artistic director, and Thomas danced under her leadership for the rest of her performing career, through 1998. That is 12 years on one of the most demanding stages in American dance, touring the country and the world. Her fellow company members in those years included Desmond Richardson, whose own DMM legacy feature tells the other side of that same era.

Her repertory included Ailey's signature *Revelations*, which she now teaches section by section, and Barry Martin's Chelsea's Bells, a rock duet set to Melissa Etheridge; AILEY's own repertory archive pictures her in it, with Aubrey Lynch Jr. But one dance became hers in a way no other did.



"He loved people. He was a very giving person."

- Nasha Thomas on Alvin Ailey, to NBC News, 2024

Cry: A Dance Made for Mothers, Danced for Hers

To understand what *Cry* meant to Nasha Thomas, you have to know where it came from. In 1971 Alvin Ailey made the solo as a birthday present for his mother, Lula, and dedicated it "to all Black women everywhere—especially our mothers." He made it on Judith Jamison, who danced the first performance at New York City Center on May 4, 1971, and made it legendary.



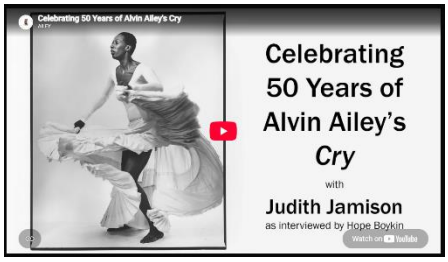
The dance runs about 16 minutes and has three parts. A woman in a white leotard and a long ruffled skirt carries the audience through sorrow, hardship and finally joy, to music by Alice Coltrane, Laura Nyro and Chuck Griffin. In her autobiography Jamison wrote that, to her, the woman in *Cry* stood for the women who came before her, through slavery and loss, who found their way and triumphed. Only a small circle of women has ever been trusted with it; by AILEY's count in 2024, 18 women had danced it since Jamison.

Thomas is one of them. Asked by DMM in 2013 for her most memorable moment on stage, her answer was her first performance of *Cry*, in London. Her mother was in the audience. Think about that. A dance created as a gift from a son to his mother, and dedicated to every Black mother, performed by a daughter while her own mother watched. She remembered one more detail: that same week, Michael Jackson was in London too, playing a stadium. It was, she said, something she would never forget.

Her *Cry* is preserved. The New York Public Library's dance collection holds a video of her performing it with the company at the Wang Theater in Boston on March 18, 1994. Three years later it brought a Johannesburg audience to its feet.

She knows exactly how hard it is. Years after performing it, Thomas began teaching the solo to younger dancers, and she told AILEY the challenge most people never notice: "One of the hardest things to do is not to finish the dance looking exhausted." Sixteen minutes of grief and fight and joy, and the woman at the end must look like she has triumphed, not like she has run out of breath. That, too, is a lesson for life.

She still carries it forward. In January 2025 she joined fellow former Ailey dancer Renee Robinson for a *Cry* tribute and panel at the Whitney Museum, and on May 10, 2025, the date that would have been Judith Jamison's 82nd birthday, she taught a *Cry* workshop at AILEY, open to dancers 13 and older.



"One of the hardest things to do is not to finish the dance looking exhausted."

- Nasha Thomas on teaching *Cry*, to AILEY, 2024

South Africa: "She Was at Home"

The 1997 South Africa tour was more than a booking. For years, international artists had stayed away from South Africa in protest of apartheid. When the Ailey company arrived that June, the mayor of Johannesburg declared June 18 Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater Day, and the city's leaders called the visit the end of a long drought.

The local dance alliance had one condition: the Ailey dancers could not just perform and leave. They had to teach. So before the curtain ever rose, the company went into schools and community centers. Children in Soweto sat on the edge of their seats at a lecture-demonstration. High school students learned a section of *Revelations*. Judith Jamison, then the company's artistic director, ended up dancing alongside young people in a Soweto community hall.

Then came opening night and Thomas's *Cry*. TIME's reporter closed his story on her, describing a Black dancer, beautiful and proud, who in many ways was at home that night. It is worth noticing the shape of that tour, because it is the shape of the rest of her life: teach first, then dance, and leave something behind.

1999 to Today: From the Stage to the Classroom

Thomas danced her last season with the company in 1998. In 1999 she joined Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs, and she has been there ever since. Around the time of the company's 50th anniversary she was co-directing the department, and she later became the National Director of AileyCamp and the department's spokesperson and master teacher.

The job is enormous. AILEY describes her as the main link between the Ailey organization and arts education communities across the country. She works with local partners to build and run AileyCamps, manages national residencies, leads workshops and teaches master classes. AILEY says its Arts In Education programs reach more than 100,000 people every year. She has taught everywhere from public school classrooms to Lincoln Center Plaza, Gracie Mansion and the White House, and Good Housekeeping named her one of its "Humanitarians Who Are Our Heroes."

When the pandemic closed studios in 2020, she found another way in. She helped open the 60th anniversary of Revelations with a socially distanced workshop streamed from the Rockefeller Center rooftop, taught virtually for TED's Discovery Series, and, with fellow former company member Michael Thomas, led the Revelations Virtual Dance Workshop Series: nine video lessons for middle schoolers that mix dance with poetry, history and music.

She is still on the road. In March 2026 she led two free public workshops in Austin with Texas Performing Arts, teaching original *Revelations* choreography from "I Been 'Buked" to "Wade in the Water" and "Rocka My Soul," and asking participants to make up moves of their own.

Why does she do it? In 2013 she told DMM a story she clearly had not stopped thinking about. After a performance in New York, during the question-and-answer session, a girl of about seven walked up and handed her a small origami figure she had folded during the show. She had made it for Thomas. She could have kept it or given it to anyone, Thomas said, but she gave it to her. Moments like that, and parents who thank her for changing their child's life, are what feed her. Her personal rule fits on a T-shirt: she is in it for "the outcome, not the income."

AileyCamp: Six Weeks That Change a Summer, and Sometimes a Life
AileyCamp was founded in 1989 by Alvin Ailey and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. It was the last project Ailey started before he died. It is a full-scholarship, six-week summer program for middle schoolers ages 11 to 14, and it is built for young people who face real challenges at school and at home, as well as for kids who simply have had little chance to explore the arts.

Campers take ballet, modern, jazz and West African dance and percussion, but the camp is not only about steps. They also take classes in creative writing, nutrition, goal setting and conflict resolution, and they work with adults who model what a confident, educated, creative life looks like. For summer 2026, under the national theme TIME (Teach, Inspire, Mentor, Elevate), AileyCamp ran in nine cities: New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Berkeley, Kansas City (Kansas and Missouri), Miami, Newark and Seattle.

This summer carried two milestones. Children's Aid/AileyCamp New York, held in the Bronx, celebrated its 35th year and welcomed more than 200 young people. And AileyCamp Newark marked its 15th summer. Since its first session in 2011, the Newark camp has been hosted at Arts High School, the nation's first public performing arts high school, in partnership with the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and Newark Public Schools.

Reporters who visited Newark this July watched Thomas walk into a rehearsal and saw the room go quiet. She moved from ballet to modern to West African dance to percussion, giving small corrections as she went: stagger your positions, practice once without music, tuck in loose strings, take the rubber bands off your wrists. One line says it all: "Be ready before the music begins." Each note was small. Together, as NJ.com put it, they showed that excellence is built through dozens of little habits.

She has been clear about why it matters. "For some of these young people that can't see past their environment, their home life and their situation, what they don't have, it gives them a vision of what is possible," she told NBC News. Sometimes the vision becomes a career. Solomon Dumas found dance at AileyCamp as a Chicago kid in 2001 and returned to AILEY as a company dancer in 2016. "I was completely blown away seeing people who looked like me doing these amazing things," he told NBC. Most campers will not become professional dancers, and that is the point: the discipline, confidence and respect go with them into whatever comes next.

"It is important for them to believe that they can have what is out there."
- Nasha Thomas on AileyCamp, to *The Root*

What Belongs to Everyone
Honoring Nasha Thomas means keeping every credit in its place. *Cry* is Alvin Ailey's dance, created on Judith Jamison, who originated it and set the standard for every woman after her. Thomas is one of a small, distinguished line of women entrusted with it, not its first.

AileyCamp, too, is the work of many hands. Ailey and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey founded it. Local partners such as Children's Aid, NJPAC and Newark Public Schools host and fund it. Camp directors, teachers and counselors run it every day. Thomas's role is to hold the national program together: to build the partnerships, set the standard and show up in the rehearsal room.

What belongs to her alone is the connection. She is one of the last dancers Ailey himself chose, and she has spent nearly three decades making sure children who will never meet him still feel what she felt: that a giving person believed they were worth the trouble.

Where Is Nasha Thomas Now?

As of October 2026, Nasha Thomas is the National Director of AileyCamp and the Spokesperson and Master Teacher for Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs, based at AILEY's Joan Weill Center for Dance in New York.

Summer 2026 was a landmark one. AileyCamp ran in nine cities under the theme TIME: Teach, Inspire, Mentor, Elevate. The Bronx camp marked 35 years and the Newark camp marked 15, and in Newark she was in the rehearsal room in July preparing campers for their August performance at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. In March she was in Austin leading public Revelations workshops. And she continues to teach *Cry*, carrying the solo, and Judith Jamison's example, to a new generation of women. Current as of October 24, 2026. For AileyCamp enrollment in your city, check ailey.org/community/aileycamp.

A Living Legacy, and Why DMM Is Telling It

Too much of dance history is written after the people who made it are gone. Nasha Thomas's story matters now for three reasons.

She is a living link. She was chosen by Alvin Ailey, danced under Judith Jamison, and is still teaching. Every summer she hands that line to children who will carry it into the 2080s.

Her path is reachable. A studio in Queens, a public arts high school, a college scholarship, a cheerleading paycheck, an audition. None of it required being born famous. Young girls can trace every step.

Her best work is often invisible. Teachers rarely get headlines. Documenting her work in classrooms and camps makes sure that contribution is credited as clearly as any performance.

The DMM Archive Connection

On June 14, 2013, Dance Mogul Magazine published its exclusive interview with Nasha Thomas-Schmitt, describing her as a blueprint "not only for young ladies but for everyone to follow." Many of the personal stories in this feature, from the Bernice Johnson studio to the Dallas Cowboys sideline to her first Cry in London, come from that conversation.

Near the end of that interview she said something that could hang on DMM's office wall. We can't control the information we get, she said, but "we can control the information that we give." She talked about how young people had followed her to the same college after learning her story, simply because someone told it. Sharing the path, she said, is how the next person finds it.

Her story also connects to DMM's wider Ailey coverage, including our Next Generation of Ailey series, our profile of Paige Fraser, our Alvin Ailey hip-hop program coverage and our legacy feature on Desmond Richardson, who danced in the company during her years there.

Why Nasha Thomas's Legacy Matters to Dance Mogul Magazine

DMM exists to show young people that the dance they learn in their own neighborhood can lead somewhere real, and to tell the stories of the people who light the way. Nasha Thomas is both the student who found the way and the teacher who lights it.

Her story fits the values DMM measures every feature against: character before celebrity, contribution before attention, people before popularity. She could have been remembered only for a great *Cry*. Instead she spent the next three decades in classrooms and camps, often far from the spotlight, because, in her words, the point is the outcome, not the income.

And it comes home. DMM was born in Newark's community dance culture, and for 15 summers AileyCamp Newark has given Newark middle schoolers six free weeks of training, mentoring and a stage at NJPAC. That is exactly the kind of work DMM was created to document. For every Newark girl reading this: the woman correcting your spacing at camp once stood where you stand.

From the Front Row to the Front of the Room

It began with a mother in the front row: at a Queens recital, and later in a London theater, watching her daughter dance a solo made for mothers.

Now Nasha Thomas stands at the front of the room. Somewhere this summer, a 12-year-old girl tucked in her loose strings, took the rubber band off her wrist and got ready before the music began, because a woman who once stood exactly where she stands told her to.

That is how a legacy dances on. Not in one body, but in all the ones it lifts.

Nasha Thomas: Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Nasha Thomas?

Nasha Thomas is an American dancer and arts educator from Queens, New York. She danced with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater from 1986 to 1998 and is now the National Director of AileyCamp and the Spokesperson and Master Teacher for Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs.

Did Nasha Thomas dance with Alvin Ailey?

Yes. Alvin Ailey invited her into his company in 1986, making her one of the last dancers he hired. She continued under Judith Jamison and danced with the company for 12 years, through 1998.

Did Nasha Thomas create the role in *Cry*?

No. Alvin Ailey created *Cry* in 1971 on Judith Jamison, who originated it. Thomas is one of the select group of women who later performed the solo, including at Ailey's first South Africa performances in 1997, and she now teaches it to younger dancers.

What is Alvin Ailey's *Cry* about?

Cry is a roughly 16-minute, three-part solo that Ailey made as a birthday present for his mother and dedicated "to all Black women everywhere—especially our mothers." Dressed in white, the dancer moves from sorrow and hardship to joy.

Where did Nasha Thomas train?

She began at Bernice Johnson's dance studio in Queens, then studied dance at New York's High School of Performing Arts and at Southern Methodist University, where she minored in English. She was a 1980 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts.

What was Nasha Thomas's first professional dance job?

By her own account to Dance Mogul Magazine, her first paid dance job was as a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader while she was a student at SMU.

What is AileyCamp?

AileyCamp is a full-scholarship, six-week summer program for middle schoolers ages 11 to 14, founded in 1989 by Alvin Ailey and the Kansas City Friends of Alvin Ailey. Campers study dance alongside creative writing, goal setting, nutrition and conflict resolution.

Where is AileyCamp held?

In summer 2026 AileyCamp ran in nine cities: New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Berkeley, Kansas City (Kansas and Missouri), Miami, Newark and Seattle. AileyCamp Newark, hosted at Arts High School with NJPAC and Newark Public Schools, celebrated its 15th summer.

Is Nasha Thomas the same person as Nasha Thomas-Schmitt?

Yes. Earlier coverage, including Dance Mogul Magazine's 2013 exclusive interview, used the name Nasha Thomas-Schmitt. AILEY now uses Nasha Thomas.

How can young dancers learn from Nasha Thomas?

Through AileyCamp in their city, Ailey Arts In Education residencies and workshops, and the free Revelations Virtual Dance Workshop Series she co-leads. Check ailey.org for current workshops.