

How the Alvin Ailey summer camp in Newark is turning young dancers into confident leaders

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Watch: AileyCamp dancers rehearse

All eyes turned to Nasha Thomas as she stepped into the dance rehearsal. The room fell quiet.

With a few words, the [AileyCamp national director](#) commanded the attention of dozens of students as she shared feedback with campers preparing for an upcoming performance at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in early August.

Thomas continued making her rounds, observing ballet, modern, West African dance and a percussion class, offering thoughtful adjustments along the way.

“Stagger your positions,” she told one group. “Practice once without music. Get used to dancing without your glasses. Don’t rely on seeing every step. Tuck in loose strings. Remove rubber bands from your wrists. Be ready before the music begins.”

Individually, the corrections were small. Collectively, they revealed something larger: Excellence is built through dozens of little habits.

Finding their voice

Her next stop was a mirrored studio where rows of girls — and one boy — dressed in black leotards waited for class. Thomas asked the modern dance students about their favorite style of dance.



Hands shot into the air. “Hip hop,” said Lissette Silvera. “Because it’s upbeat and contemporary.” Another student answered, “Jazz.” “Because you can express yourself. You can move your body,” offered 12-year-old Kamille Latney. Thomas pressed her. “And what else?” “You can use your personality,” Kamille said, as if surprising herself. Thomas smiled. “Show me.” Kamille’s entire body dissolved into laughter.



A legacy of possibility

[AileyCamp](#) was created by the late Alvin Ailey as the educational arm of his world-renowned dance company. Its mission is to provide life-changing experiences that stretch the minds, bodies and spirits of young people.

Founded in 1989 by [Alvin Ailey and Kansas City Friends](#) of Alvin Ailey, the Ailey Arts In Education & Community Programs have introduced communities across the country to the power of dance.

This summer marks AileyCamp’s 15th year in Newark, where the program launched in 2011. The six-week session began June 30 and will culminate Aug. 7 with a performance at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. AileyCamp is also underway in eight other cities across the country.

Admission to the camp is competitive. Students apply by completing [an application](#) and meeting age and grade requirements. No previous dance experience is required. Once accepted, the program is free and includes transportation, meals and instruction.

Over several weeks, campers build discipline and confidence through daily classes in ballet, [Horton-based modern dance](#), jazz, West African dance, personal development and creative communication. The curriculum is designed to foster positive self-expression, conflict resolution and critical-thinking skills.

Instructors reinforce those lessons through daily affirmations, including: “I will not use the word ‘can’t’ to define my possibilities,” encouraging campers to become confident, motivated and resilient.



Growing in confidence

This year’s cohort includes 104 girls and three boys, ages 11 to 14. It is AileyCamp’s largest group since the [COVID 19 pandemic](#).

“I don’t fear making mistakes anymore,” said Dominique Roberson, 14, who attends University High School in Newark, where she lives. “I just breathe and tell myself it’s okay, and I can make mistakes. That’s exactly why I’m here — to make mistakes that elevate.”

For 13-year-old Aria Gonzalez-Potts of Newark, now it’s her time to dance. “Even when I was in second grade, my mom wanted to put me in dance school, but it was during COVID, and I didn’t get to dance then.” Today, dance is helping shape her future. Aria hopes to become a physical therapy assistant and already sees the connection.

“You study body movements and work on muscle memory in dance — and that’s one thing you do in physical therapy too,” she said. “Dance has helped me build my confidence, and now, as a returning camper, I help the new people coming in build their confidence.”

Joy Saintflorant, 11, who was recently accepted to Cicely Tyson Middle School in East Orange, encouraged her mother to find a dance camp. A social media search led them to AileyCamp two summers ago. Although she arrived without knowing anyone, she quickly found a sense of belonging.



“Everybody was nice. It was fun,” Joy said. “The first day, when we had to make a dance and come up with a group name, it was really good.”

At 11, Darren “DJ” Jacob Edmonds is finding his footing at AileyCamp, where being one of the only boys once meant “getting picked on a lot.” After dancing at home for his parents and training in tap and hip hop, he’s learning to push through the teasing, deepen his love of dance and claim his place in a program that is helping transform early hurt into confidence.

“When I came here, I was younger,” DJ said. “I was one of the only boys, so I was getting picked on a lot. But I kept going.”

Their stories underscore that AileyCamp offers far more than dance instruction. Campers learn to express themselves, embrace discipline and discover confidence that extends well beyond the stage.

Learning to lead

As AileyCamp director, Newark native Ronnie D. Carney serves as both the artistic and logistical leader of the program. He hires and mentors instructional staff, reviews lesson plans and keeps the curriculum aligned with Ailey’s values, sound dance pedagogy and broader educational goals, while also handling practical details such as scheduling, coordinating space and arranging meals.

Drawing on his deep roots in Newark, Carney connects campers not only to the Ailey organization’s standards but also to the culture and resources of the city. His work extends well beyond the summer through fall programs, alumni retreats, camper recruitment and parent outreach.

“Dance teaches children how to communicate before they ever have to speak,” Carney said. “Presented with the opportunity to explore, to discover... the more that we learn, discover and play with in our lives, it wakes us up to what’s possible. That creativity, that exposure, really opens them up to a lot.”

Students explore movement through percussion

Students learn West African drumming during AileyCamp Newark at Arts High School in Newark on July 22. The program serves 107 campers ages 11 to 14. Chris Pedota | For NJ.com

Percussion instructor LaToya Wigfall uses West African music as both a rhythmic foundation and a history lesson, guiding campers through the ways African culture has traveled and evolved across the diaspora.



“We started with a suite from the West African region, and then they began learning about how African culture has traveled through the diaspora,” Wigfall said.

Her classes go beyond technique, inviting students to feel rhythm in their bodies so drumming becomes a way to embody their heritage rather than simply perform it. For Wigfall, drumming is less about performance than it is about listening — to oneself, to others and to the spaces in between.

“They learn the value of sound and silence, and how we have conversations with both,” she said.

That emphasis on growth extends beyond the classroom.



“So this summer in morning meetings, we always talk about how we can teach each other,” Carney said. “How we can inspire each other, how we lean on our mentors, how even our peers can become mentors and how we all elevate each other.”

In the halls of Arts High School, Carney points to a series of legacy walls that ground young dancers in a lineage they can see themselves in — from ballet and jazz to West African percussion and modern dance. Each display pairs images of influential artists with vocabulary and history, affirming that Black and brown children belong in these traditions and are actively shaping them.

A themed wall built around the acronym TIME — Teach, Inspire, Mentor, Elevate — reinforces the message that campers are inheriting a powerful artistic legacy while also being called to carry it forward.

That cycle is already visible. Former campers regularly return as volunteers, coaches and instructors, helping guide the next generation of AileyCamp students.

Christopher Taylor is one example of where that journey can lead. Taylor attended AileyCamp for three consecutive summers. After his first summer, he auditioned for The Ailey School and was accepted. He credits much of that transition to Thomas.

Today, Taylor, 26, is a principal dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, performing some of the company’s most iconic works, including Revelations’ “Wade in the Water.” Taylor said Alvin Ailey’s legacy gave him something he had never fully seen before: representation and possibility. “Dance is no longer simply performance,” he said.

For Carney, alumni like Taylor embody what AileyCamp was designed to do. “The goal isn’t simply to teach young people to dance,” he said. “It’s to help them discover what’s possible — and inspire them to return and open those same doors for someone else.”

As Thomas headed to the next classroom, she paused one last time. “Where’s the focus?” “Outward and down,” she instructed. “Everybody, look straight out to the audience.” The room responded instantly. Hours earlier, all eyes had turned to Thomas. Now, she was teaching campers to look beyond themselves.

