DANCE CAMP WIDENS HORIZONS OF AT-RISK YOUTHS

NAOMI JOHNSON DIOUF leads a warm-up exercise in her African dance class at AlleyCamp, a six-week program that teaches at-risk youths dancing and other life skills.

Changing lives, step by step

By Kimberly S. Wetzel

THERE'S A SENSE of excitement in the air as the students begin their dance class. The music fills the room, and the dancers move gracefully, their bodies in perfect harmony.

The students are a diverse group of at-risk youths who attend AlleyCamp, a six-week program that teaches dancing and other life skills. Each day, the students arrive at the studio, eager to learn and grow.

"What we teach them is there are more important ways to behave," says AlleyCamp ballet instructor Willie Anderson. "Dancing is a way to express themselves, to release their emotions, and to build self-esteem." 

The students work hard, practicing their moves and perfecting their technique. They learn to work together, to support each other, and to overcome challenges.

One day, Anderson spots a student struggling with a particular move. He moves in to help, guiding the student through the steps with patience and encouragement.

"I never thought I could dance," says one student. "But now I see that I can." 

As the weeks go by, the students' confidence grows. They perform a final recital, showcasing their hard work and dedication.

The audience is amazed by the students' talent and determination. "I'm so proud of them," says Anderson. "They've accomplished something they never thought they could." 

The students go on to pursue their dreams, many of them enrolling in dance classes and competitions. AlleyCamp has given them the tools they need to succeed.

"The students' bodies jerk in and out of balance, their arms totter up and down, and their ankles twitch with tension," Anderson says. "Soon, Anderson relents and lets the youngsters drop to their heels. Onlookers

AILEYCAMP STUDENTS play with seaweed while aboard the 82 foot schooner Seaward.

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exhale with smiles of relief, though the dancers do not, instead bustling into the next position.

It’s difficult to believe that most of the 11- to 14-year-old dancers have never taken a dance class before. Many also come from low-income families, have only one parent at home and live in neighborhoods that can be rough.

Regardless of such circumstances, organizers of the AileyCamp — a six-week program sponsored by UC Berkeley’s Cal Performances that teaches at-risk youths dancing and other life skills — aim to mold disciplined, focused, well-behaved young adults who develop a passion for the arts through holistic learning.

Founded in 1988 in Kansas City by legendary dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey, AileyCamp is a national program that helps youths learn self-expression and self-respect through dance and personal development classes. The AileyCamp overseen by Cal Performances is the only one of its kind on the West Coast.

This year, local organizers picked 80 students out of hundreds of applicants from West Contra Costa County, Oakland, Berkeley and Albany to take part in the African, ballet, modern and jazz dance classes that are the program’s trademark.

Those selected must exhibit some or all of the camp’s at-risk criteria. Students receive transportation, uniforms, meals, dance lessons and personal development classes in which they learn about such topics as health, responsibility, self-esteem, conflict resolution and drug awareness.

“What we teach them is there are more important ways to be,” said brush, Nealy, personal development instructor for the local program. “If they don’t remove any blockages that they have, they can’t perform well on stage.”

The students take classes Mondays through Thursdays, leaving Fridays open for field trips where they test out their swim strokes, bowl for a strike or learn sailing instruction through the OCSC Sailing School in Berkeley.

AileyCamp is free for its students, funded through corporate and private donations. It mixes each year with a student dance production under the lights at UC Berkeley’s Zellerbach Hall. This year’s performance, which is free and open to the public, is scheduled for Aug. 2.

“For a lot of them, they come in with a lot of challenges for kids their age,” said program director David McCasley. “At the end of the camp, there’s often a huge change in many of them.”

Those changes include more confidence, improved behavior at school and a more worldly view, camp organizers say.

The curriculum is challenging. The students take four dance classes a day, and their nationally recognized instructors don’t tolerate a lack of focus.

“You’re not listening! modern dance instructor M’wami El-Debbar yells during a recent practice. “Gonna try to do you now.”

Despite the hard work, the students say they enjoy it.

“Tm having a lot of fun,” said Oakland resident Beautiful Spears, 12. “I really like the dance classes and am learning so much.”

Though AileyCamp appealed mainly to girls in past years, recent efforts to get boys involved have paid off, with 22 participating this year. Boys are not required to wear leotards but must wear black shirts and a white T-shirt.

“Tm having a lot of fun,” McCasley said of the boys. “Dancing calls for a different set of motor control, but the instructors try to like it to sports.”

The boys enjoy other portions of the program, too. On a recent sailing excursion, their “male” side was apparent.

“That’s where pirates fight each other with swords,” 13-year-old Oakland resident Sidney George Jr. said as he glanced up at the sails on their 24-foot schooner for the day, Seaward. For many of the students, the sailing excursion is one of the highlights of the camp. Deckhands teach them sailing lingo, let them raise the sails and show them sea critters.

“Ooh, what’s the heck is it?” 12-year-old San Pablo resident Mia Stewart shrieked as she wigged some sea sponge in her palm. “It feels all goopy!”

Although many have never been on a boat and several are usually nervous beforehand, once they conquer their fear of the water, camp organizers say, they can see the immediate transformation. The same is true of dance classes — the children really start to get it.

“Some of them are out of the element and don’t know what to expect,” Nealy said. “They just haven’t been exposed to other ways of walking in the world, other ways of thinking. We really want to transform their lives.”

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