Henry's approach is no-nonsense, but polite, peppered with positive feedback. She explains everything carefully, and her immediate positive response to questions is “I’m listening.” At first, the kids get to know each other. Henry says, “There is culture shock. By the second day, conflicts arise, and by the fourth day we're into conflict resolution. The kids say they help them come together. I tell them, ‘Attitude is everything.’ You can’t have fun if there’s conflict.”

The kids’ eagerness to participate is striking. They may not want to share their own writing in creative communications, but eight hands shoot up when teacher Katie Schatz asks the group what someone else’s poem was about. Camper Charles Edwards, 13, describes one of the classes as “really deep. We were all crying because we did ‘I remember’ poems.” In the jazz class, when teacher Rosario Lionudakis asks a question or wants volunteers to move to the front row, there’s a sudden burst of enthusiasm from kids who had seemed inattentive. As small groups finish a combination, their friends give them a high-five. If kids are the heart of AlleyCamp, the teachers are its soul. Apart from looking for accomplished instructors, McCauley tries to get “a broad spectrum of people who can work together and focus on the children. They have to support each other because it can be intense, and the kids see that. And if the students have difficulty with anything, I tell them they can always talk to someone in staff. I try to have a wide variety of people so that just about anyone will find someone they can click with.”

According to modern-dance teacher Mbewe Escobar, AlleyCamp has a profound ability to transform children. “I know that many of them use their new skills in their academic settings. And given the nature of society today—the abundance of influences that surround young people, the challenges and pressures that affect their choices—in that sense, all children are at risk of making the wrong choice. These kids are at an age where they can discover the kinds of choices that will show them the road to success. AlleyCamp does that, and that’s why I’m involved with it. It’s a cool thing for children to be validated if they enjoy writing or the visual arts, to be told it’s a good thing and they should continue exploring it. It's great to find out about yourself; I think it helps them make good choices. They could choose a group of people who are into something positive and not a situation where the outcome could be negative.”

As director of the New York City camp for three years, Escobar says she saw the program transform families as well. “When parents see their children doing something, they didn’t know they could do, it helps them to see them in a different way. So the children get a new sense of themselves and their possibilities, and the families can too.”

Spoken word segments add poignancy to the performance.

'Self-esteem in the past week. Henry’s approach is no-nonsense, but polite, peppered with positive feedback. She explains everything carefully, and her immediate response to questions is “I’m listening.” At first, as the kids get to know each other, Henry says, “there is culture shock. By the second day, conflicts arise, and by the fourth day we’re into conflict resolution. The kids say it helps them come together. I tell them, ‘Attitude is everything. You can’t have fun if there’s conflict.’ ”

The kids’ eagerness to participate is striking. They may not want to share their own writing in creative communications, but eight hands shoot up when teacher Katie Schatz asks the group what someone else’s poem was about. Camper Charles Edwards, 13, describes one of the classes as “really deep. We were all crying because we did ‘I remember’ poems.” In the jazz class, when teacher Rosario Lionudakis asks a question or wants volunteers to move to the front row, there’s a sudden burst of enthusiasm from kids who had seemed inattentive. As small groups finish a combination, their friends give them a high-five. If kids are the heart of AlleyCamp, the teachers are its soul. Apart from looking for accomplished instructors, McCauley tries to get “a broad spectrum of people who can work together and focus on the children. They have to support each other because it can be intense, and the kids see that. And if the students have difficulty with anything, I tell them they can always talk to someone in staff. I try to have a wide variety of people so that just about anyone will find someone they can click with.”

According to modern-dance teacher Mbewe Escobar, AlleyCamp has a profound ability to transform children. “I know that many of them use their new skills in their academic settings. And given the nature of society today—the abundance of influences that surround young people, the challenges and pressures that affect their choices—in that sense, all children are at risk of making the wrong choice. These kids are at an age where they can discover the kinds of choices that will show them the road to success. AlleyCamp does that, and that’s why I’m involved with it. It’s a cool thing for children to be validated if they enjoy writing or the visual arts, to be told it’s a good thing and they should continue exploring it. It’s great to find out about yourself; I think it helps them make good choices. They could choose a group of people who are into something positive and not a situation where the outcome could be negative.”

As director of the New York City camp for three years, Escobar says she saw the program transform families as well. “When parents see their children doing something, they didn’t know they could do, it helps them to see them in a different way. So the children get a new sense of themselves and their possibilities, and the families can too.”

AileyCampers learn a lot about dance, but they also learn about life, and people, and how to function in society.

Above: For director David McCauley—AlleyCamp is a labor of love. Right: AileyCampers celebrate after their performance. Below: Beautiful Summer Spears (left) and Bumelah Carter-Douglas break away from their creative communications project for a photo op.

Even the structure and process of a dance class helps to teach children life lessons. “One of the benefits of a dance education is that it dispels this crazy myth that dancers are dumb because they’re mute,” says Escobar. “The mind is totally engaged. And whatever technique is being taught, certain principles are universal. The idea of knowing and maintaining their personal space and respecting others—it’s a big deal for young people this age.” She emphasizes how learning technique and choreography teaches children about follow-through. “Ninety percent of their choreography comes from what they did in class; I build it into class. I want them to see that the process has brought them to a new place. They can use this kind of process, of setting goals and working through it, for the rest of their lives.”

Partial proof of the camp’s success is the desire of former campers to return as volunteers; some eventually move into paid positions as group leaders and one now teaches at AlleyCamp. Others say that AlleyCamp didn’t change their life but, says Thomas-Schnitt, “it enhanced [it] and instilled certain values in them. For some people it’s a life-saver.”

One who changed dramatically, says McCauley, is...
former camper Yejide Najee-Ullah, a 2007 AlleyCamp group leader and a sophomore at Smith College.

"Unbeknownst to me (in 2002), she didn’t want to be
here," he says. "The turnaround in her after she saw what
was going on was so quick and so complete that she vol-
unteered for us every year since then. She is the Berkeley
site’s first camper who’s now an employee." Having for-
campers in the program is "the ultimate form of men-
torship," says McCauley. "The [campers] know that Yejide
was [one of them], and now she goes to this wonderful
college. It’s like, ‘Oh—that’s a possibility for me, too.’"

McCauley can’t talk about AlleyCamp without getting
tearful. "Every year, there I am, watching them get ready to
perform, and it’s been six weeks of ‘Do this,’ and ‘You have
to be ready.’ And some of them are just kind of there, and
some are about to do the wrong thing at the wrong time,
and I’m just like, ‘Whatever happens when the curtain
goes up, happens.’ And then to see them pull themselves
together, to see that light go on in them when the curtain
goes up, to see that change when the audience ap-
plauds—it’s terrific."

"It’s blood, sweat, and tears for six weeks, but it’s one
of the most gratifying kinds of teaching that I do," says
Escolar. "Every time I see the children perform it’s like
seeing the butterfly emerge from the chrysalis. They have
grown their wings and they are ready to fly."