



Spoken word segments add poignancy to the performance.

self-esteem in the past week. Nealy'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, Nealy 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 Kate 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 AileyCamp, 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 any student will find someone they can click with."

According to modern-dance teacher M'bewe Escobar, AileyCamp has a profound ability to transform children. "I know that many of them use their new skills in their

'I like it more than sports. They cheer you up . . . and if you want to give up they'll keep on encouraging you. I'm thinking of being a volunteer next year.'

—AileyCamper Oscar Urquiza

Photo by Jim Dennis



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



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. AileyCamp 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."

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 AileyCamp. Others say that AileyCamp didn't change their life but, says Thomas-Schmitt, "it enhanced [it] and instilled certain values in them. For some people it's a life-saver."

One who changed dramatically, says McCauley, is

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

Above left: photos courtesy Cal Performances, above right: photo by Jim Dennis





former camper Yejide Najee-Ullah, a 2007 AileyCamp 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 volunteered for us every year since then. She is [the Berkeley site's] first camper who's now an employee." Having for-

mer campers in the program is "the ultimate form of mentorship," 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 AileyCamp without getting teary. "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 them change when the audience applauds—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 Escobar. "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." ♦



Top: An African dance, a camper favorite, brought cheers from the audience at the performance. Above: Modern-dance instructor M'bewe Escobar leads rehearsal.

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