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Kids from the 'hood get breakfast, lunch and a new attitude at Cal dance camp



**C.W. .
Nevius**

Twelve-year-old DeAngelo Wilson is having a great summer.

"We show up in the morning," he says. "We eat breakfast. And then we dance all day."

For six weeks, Wilson and 90 other middle school kids have the run of the Cal campus, work with instructors from the prestigious Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and — this is big — do some major eating in the award-winning university cafeteria. All for free, because Cal Performances chips in about \$250,000 to make it happen.

And at the end of camp there is a huge, blowout performance on the stage of jam-packed Zellerbach Hall.

Who wouldn't want to do that? You'd be surprised.

For starters, you have to know where the kids are coming from — literally and figuratively. They live in East Oakland, south Berkeley and Richmond — parts of the East Bay that aren't exactly summer camp territory. Wilson and the other campers this year all have something in common, and it is probably not a talent for dance.

"This is one of the discussions

we had," says Naomi Johnson Diouf, an instructor at the camp and West African dance and culture teacher at Berkeley High. "Look, we are not picking kids from Piedmont, the Berkeley hills and Claremont. We have kids come in here with bandanas, gang colors and from the street. We have to get them out of there."

There are, of course, many well-intentioned, academically researched programs for at-risk teens. They all have the same goal of getting the kids out of the

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Josh Jacobs, 19, (left) and **Madiou Diouf,** 22, set the beat for middle school kids at a dance camp on the UC Berkeley campus.

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Dance instructors can be tough like drill sergeants

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'hood and into something worthwhile. It is a wonderful goal.

This program is different.

For one thing, the instructors yell at the kids. Derrick Minter, a modern-dance veteran and rehearsal director from the Ailey troupe, was working with a group of 22 boys on a dance routine. The camp has been at Cal for five years, but this is the first time they've had enough young men to put together their own routine.

Minter, who has the look and physique of an NFL cornerback, was taking no crap. The boys snapped to immediately when he said, "Gentlemen, first position." But this isn't public school. Kids who aren't trying or who cause problems are dropped from the program.

"Get out of line," Minter said to a kid who couldn't resist making a small joke. "You're not going to be in this. You have too many issues, and I don't have time for issues. When your mother and father ask why you aren't in this, tell them you don't know how to act."

From the looks on the faces of the rest of the boys, this was not the first time this had happened, nor did they think Minter was kidding around. The young jokester was soon back with the group, but his fellow dancers barely noticed. They were fixed on their task, si-

AileyCamp dancers perform at UC Berkeley

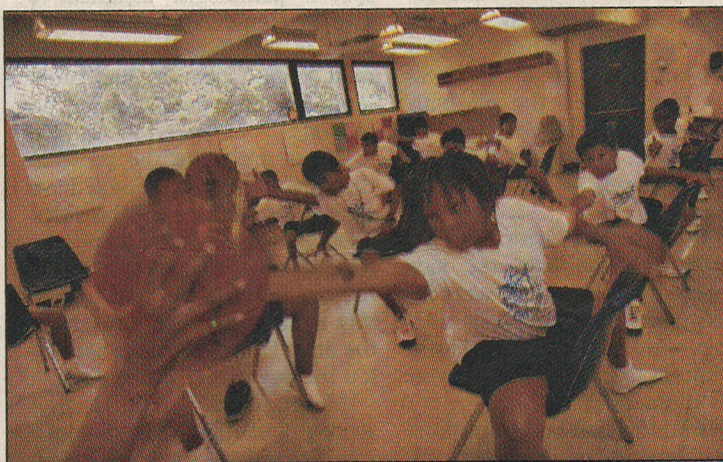
The fifth annual performance of the AileyCamp dancers, "Past, Present, Future," will be held at 7 p.m. Aug. 3 at Zellerbach Hall on the UC Berkeley campus. Free. Visit www.calperfs.berkeley.edu/presents/.

lently counting out their steps, not just well-behaved and quiet but deeply involved in something important.

Although the size of the camp has grown every year, AileyCamp director David McCauley is especially pleased to see the boys. It isn't easy to tell the guys in East Oakland or Richmond that they are going to dance class this summer. And yes, there is ballet. And no, there isn't any giggling or skylarking allowed there either.

"It is a tough challenge," says McCauley, a student, performer and instructor at the Ailey Dance Theater. "I work on it in my presentations. I point out the men in the videos, and tell them dance is more difficult than sports and you have to smile while you are doing it."

"They look at it as girlie," admits Minter. "I tell them everything you do in basketball we do



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Ayinde Webb, 12, of Oakland works on a move during rehearsal.

in ballet."

"I thought it was feminine," says dancer Silvio Jesus. "We were moving our hips. But everyone was doing the same thing."

McCauley says they insist on dance shoes for everyone but don't make the guys don tights.

"That would be a breaking point for some of the boys," he says. "I tell them in my presentation: 'You are going to get breakfast, lunch, T-shirts, shorts and leotards.' And when I say 'leotards' all the boys back up and go 'Aaaaaaaa.' And then I say, '... for the girls,' and they all come back."

Frankly, the success of the program can be seen before the big performance. There's more confidence, heightened self-esteem and a commitment to the task. But the show is inevitably an emotional highlight. McCauley describes how, the first year, he stood backstage as his performers slouched

in position, giggled and teased each other.

"All the things," he says, "they were doing when they first came here."

And then suddenly, seconds before the curtain rose, they came together, froze in position and prepared to dance. McCauley still gets a catch in his throat when he recalls that moment. Minter says he's seen more than one parent unexpectedly overcome with emotion.

One year a mother sent a note of thanks to McCauley. In it was a check for \$100. She said she sent it with one regret.

"I wish," she said, "I could send more."

C.W. Nevius' column appears Thursdays and Saturdays in the Bay Area section. His blog C.W. Nevius.blog can be found at SFGate.com. E-mail him at cwnevius@sfchronicle.com.