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SE Center Brings In Arts by Leaps And Bounds

At-Risk Youths Flock to Showcase Facility

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In a sun-dappled aerie in Anacostia, a corner of the city too often linked to crime and blight, the campers wait. Young girls with buns and beads and braids. Teenagers with sass and silence and smiles. But all in leotards, waiting to dance.

The little ones begin stretching to the music of Ellington. "Butterfly position! Backs straight!" teacher Mishelle Sloan commands. Given the 9 a.m. hour, several are still sleepy-slow. Others, however, are microbursts of energy. Sloan is undaunted.

"You have to practice. You have to discipline your bodies," she tells the group. "Look forward! Long necks."

Vivaldi is playing for the older girls. With "Spring," the most buoyant of his four seasons, they polish their *balancés* and *port de bras*. They are just a day away from a culminating recital, and by now their instructor is fine-tuning more than teaching. Monica Johnson reminds the teens that a stage exit is as important as a stage entrance.

"You have to go off with assurance," she stresses.

It is only a camp, the same kind of summer diversion as any other camp. Yet in a community that seems so far from the celebrated theaters, concert halls and museums of Washington, the hours these campers have spent here over the past four weeks are somehow different, offering another world of dreams and horizons.

Two years ago, none of it would have been possible. Then a grand, beautiful building opened at 1901 Mississippi Ave. SE, a place dubbed THEARC, for Town Hall Education, Arts and Recreation Campus. Designed with several of the city's premier arts organizations, the project aimed to offer classes and programs for at-risk youths.

The community's response was immediate. And classical music, painting and dance began to flourish in Anacostia for the first time.

Like THEARC, the camp is more than the sum of its parts. Its dance classes are the most visible of those parts, however, thanks to the glass-walled studio that fronts the building's entrance. At night it is a sparkling jewel.



The Washington Ballet summer camp at the Town Hall Education, Arts and Recreation Campus grooms tomorrow's ballerinas while dispelling the notion that Southeast Washington, D.C. is a haven of crime and ruin.

This summer's six dozen ballerinas quickly adopted the space as their own, the more pint-sized ones clowning before class in front of the studio's wide ribbon of mirrors.

"It's a safe haven," said Katrina Toews of the Washington Ballet, the professional company that runs the campus's dance component year-round. "I feel like our whole goal is to make them feel special while they're here. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't be tough on them. I can't let them down."

Some, such as Tori Wilds, hope for a lifetime of leotards. At home in Fort Washington, the 15-year-old's room is painted the same pink as her tights. Playbills from the performances she has attended are in a drawer for safekeeping.

Tori remembers the moment back in elementary school when she decided she would become a ballerina. She was watching a ballet on TV, captivated by the grace and movement. Suddenly, she turned to her mother and declared: "This is what I want to do."

And who among the young girls might dream the same someday? Seven-year-old Anne Bishop has taught her dolls the moves she's learned in class. Taniya Holton, also 7, now struts even when she and the other campers walk down the hall single file.

"I love ballet," Taniya said.

"She loves being on stage," said her mother, Sheldonna Harris.

In recital rehearsal last week, the children were alternately focused and distracted. A speck on the floor diverted attention from the teacher early in Thursday's class.

"OK, that's a little bug, and I'm pretty sure he's scared of you guys," Sloan said as she tried to arrange more than a dozen fidgety bodies into lines.

One by one she sent them diagonally across the room. The girls took turns practicing the grand jetés of their "Ribbon Dance."

Nasya Rahman, a diminutive 6-year-old from Southeast, did especially well as she jumped, and Sloan had her demonstrate for the class.

"Did you practice?" Sloan asked.

Nasya's answer was slightly delayed. "Yeah."

"You had to think about it," Sloan noted. "Did you practice at home?"

"Yeah," Nasya replied. "My momma told me to stop leaping."