

# The Miami Herald

## AileyCamp Miami welcomes its first camper with Down syndrome

By: Brooke Henderson

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*AileyCamp boosts kids' confidence through dance. Here's how you can watch them shine.*



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Dance is what makes Kristina Lahoud come alive. Whenever she hears music, especially Rihanna, she can't help but move with the beat.

“Even at school, to get her to go up on stage to get her diploma, they said they should have turned on some music so she could walk across,” her mother Nicola Budham laughed.

To follow her passion, Kristina joined AileyCamp Miami, an annual summer camp presented the past nine years by Adrienne Arsht Center.

Kristina is Ailey's first camper with Down syndrome.

Her mother saw a program flier and knew they had to try. Other programs were too expensive, she said, or didn't coordinate with her work schedule.

“I wrote the director. I was asking different things about the camp, but what I was really asking was if they accept kids with disabilities,” Budham said.

And they did. Out of more than 300 applicants, Kristina was selected to dance. She and 104 other campers would become their own company, learning to rely on each other and put on a full scale production, said Jairo Ontiveros, director of education at the Arsht Center, where the camp takes place.

The finale is Saturday night at the Arsht Center, where the campers will put on a show with their very own set design team, sound designer and more.

At AileyCamp, kids ages 11-14 learn to dance from experienced teaching artists in popular styles such as West African, jazz and ballet. The six-week program uses workshops to build their confidence and promote personal and creative development.



“I think programs tend to get scared because the child is different or has a disability. It's our job to address the person first and keep pushing ourselves to understand what inclusivity means,” Ontiveros said.

This year's theme is unity. Using dance and spoken word, campers at Saturday's performance will express what unity means to them in their lives and community.

“The program is not to find the next great dancer, but using the art of dance to shape and mold these young talented minds,” Ontiveros said.

Now when Kristina comes home, she has new dance moves to show her mom. Sometimes West African dance steps. Sometimes, jazz hands.

“She wants to be accepted. She's just like another kid. When she's with her sister, she's like, ‘Oh, she's the bright one.’ She picks up on the fact her sister would know what to do and say in a certain situation when maybe she wouldn't. And maybe that's why she's a little shy. I think the dance is really bringing her out of her shell,” Budham said.



With her counselor, Dallas Rivers, Kristina is not shy at all. The two sat together for lunch. Rivers, a Miami-Dade Schools' guidance counselor for Students in Special Education, danced in her seat as Kristina ate quietly.

"Work, work, work, work, work," Rivers sang, swaying with the the lyrics to Kristina's favorite song.

Without looking up from her meatball sub, Kristina put her hand on her counselor's arm.

"Don't embarrass me," she said playfully.

"Well, if you don't do the dance I'll just have to keep singing" she replied.

The relationship with Rivers is just one of many bonds Kristina has formed in the camp. She's also close to friend Brianna Rondon, 13, who said the camp has taught her how to feel confident and better treat others.

"I'm not scared anymore to dance in front of people," she said.

AileyCamp was the first time she ever wore a leotard. Besides helping youth develop their self-confidence in a positive atmosphere, the program also provides everything from transportation to backpacks to food.

"[Kristina's] a joy to work with and she's made some great friends," Ontiveros said. "And yes it may take her a little longer to catch up to a move, but she still strives for being a team member. She's not giving up, and she's not the type to give up."



### **AILEY CAMP FINALE**

- **Where:** Knight Concert Hall, Adrienne Arsht Center, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., Miami
- **When:** Standby line forms at 6 p.m. Saturday
- **Tickets:** Admission is free and on a first-come, first-served basis based upon seat availability

Watch the video here: <http://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/performing-arts/article165435262.html>