American by birth and Dominican by heart, this Latina never let her failures define her. Born and raised in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Belén Pereyra-Alem never lost sight of her dreams despite the numerous moments of doubt and insecurity. Raised by the diverse city of Lawrence, Pereyra-Alem shares the fond memories of her childhood and how her heritage made an impact in her personal and professional growth.

**How did growing up in Lawrence influence your perception of self?**
It was a beautiful atmosphere to grow up in. There were events happening year-round, one of my favorite being Hispanic week. Each day we celebrated a different country from Latin America like Peru one day, Venezuela the next, and so on. By the weekend, the city hosted a carnival celebrating the diversity within the Latin community with a parade, food, and music!

Even though I spoke English at school, everyone in my community spoke Spanish, so I never forgot the language. Experiences like these drew me closer to my culture because I stayed true to my roots. I never felt like I missed out by not being born in the Dominican Republic. It was an identity acknowledged and celebrated in Lawrence.

**How did this upbringing cultivate your love for dance?**
Given the diversity I was introduced to from such a young age, I actually started dancing with La Marinera — a Peruvian folk dance. That dance background helped me transition into various styles like ballet and modern easily. In most folk dances, the theatrical and storytelling aspects are essential to the art form. Learning those qualities from an early age allowed me to stand out against other technically skilled dancers. I also think my performance ability taught me to enjoy every movement, helping me fall more in love with the art of dance and performance.

**Ballet isn’t known for being an inclusive art form. Did you ever feel like an outsider when you started training?**
I was still living in Lawrence when I started learning ballet. Since we were in a predominantly Hispanic city, my teachers pronounced the French terms with a heavy accent and my peers understood where I came from. Even when I moved to Boston, my first ballet teacher there was Hispanic and taught just like my teachers in Lawrence. I was fortunate to have never felt like an outcast. Especially now that I dance with Ailey, I’m passed the stage of feeling left out and I truly enjoy all the diversity surrounding me.

**What was your family’s opinion when you decided to pursue dance professionally?**
My mom was the reason I started dancing. Working class families have aspirations just like everyone else, but they have to change the course of their lives in order to pay the bills. That’s what my mother did. Even though we never discussed her dreams before coming to the states, I think she’s living her dream through me. It was hard at first though. After high school, I didn’t go to college in order to pursue dance. I never listened to anyone, even my mother, that really emphasized the importance of a college education. I was stubborn but I was determined. It wasn’t until I got into Alvin Ailey that she noticed this was real and that I was going to do whatever was necessary to achieve my goals.

“Luck is preparation meeting opportunity” -Oprah Winfrey

Reflecting on your dance career, what has been the most memorable experience to date?
I’ve been a professional dancer for 10 years but getting into the Ailey company trumps any other experience I’ve had. At the time I auditioned for them, I was getting rejections from lots of other schools! I even doubted why I was pushing myself so hard when it felt like no company wanted me. But it was good to go through that because now I understand my power. I did anything and everything I could to make sure I accomplished what I set out to do. People like to make excuses for why they haven’t met their goals. If you sit at home saying you want to pursue something...that’s cute. But God can’t do anything for you until you get up and do the work. Getting into Ailey was the coolest moment in my career and has introduced me to phenomenal people in the dance world.

What advice could you offer youth aspiring to pursue a career in the arts?
Grit is grit. If you want it, it’s yours. Don’t be afraid to work for it and always live in your truth — however you define it. It’s important to be careful with the advice you take because it could manifest your truth. Just remember, Oprah once said, “luck is preparation meeting opportunity.”

Hurry! Don’t miss your opportunity to see Belen and the Ailey dancers this upcoming season. Starting on November 29th, Ailey’s New York City Center will premiere their holiday season followed by a national tour beginning in January of 2018. This season will highlight new productions by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Talley Beatty, Twyla Tharp and many more renowned choreographers.

Click here and don’t miss your chance to support Alvin Ailey in a city near you!

Thank you Lauren and Belen for making this interview possible!