

IN HER SHOES – The Dance Director Who Loves a Bright Suit. Alvin Ailey Extension’s Lisa Johnson-Willingham is an emotional dresser.

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As the director of Alvin Ailey’s public dance and fitness center, Ailey Extension, Lisa Johnson-Willingham is literally on the move, constantly. On any given day she could be teaching a master class to students, taking a dance class herself, meeting with clients about potential partnerships, or all of the above. Add to that two teenage children, and Johnson-Willingham has a packed schedule that takes her from parent-teacher conferences to red-carpet appearances. To ensure she’s always appropriately dressed, her desk doesn’t just house extra shoes, but also workout clothes and the occasional camisole for after-hours events.

Growing up in Washington, D.C., she pursued dance and attended the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She danced for Alvin Ailey in New York for five years in the ‘90s before moving to Chicago, where she choreographed and danced for the likes of the Goodman Theater, the Steppenwolf Theater, and the Chicago Dramatist. In 2011, she returned to New York and became the director of Ailey Extension.

The Cut caught up with Johnson-Willingham where she talked about her love of bright colors, what she thinks to herself before a big work meeting, and how dance influences her wardrobe.

On succumbing to commuter shoes: When I moved back to New York City in 2011, I learned that these streets were not kind to my beloved pumps. I embraced commuter shoes but I also learned to incorporate more practical styles into my wardrobe. I love sneakers and I’ll dress down a fancier look with my leather Nike high-tops or a sock sneaker.

On her desk shoes: Similar to my days as an Ailey dancer, I’m always ready for a quick change. I keep over half a dozen shoes under my desk — just in case! Currently in heavy rotation are my Michael Kors pumps and Adidas sneakers, but I keep everything from sandals to wedges to ankle boots and flats on hand.

On dressing for a big meeting: I usually love wearing something bright and bold but I feel most confident in a chic, tailored black dress with red lipstick and stilettos. My line of work affords me the opportunity to spend a decent amount of time in business-casual clothing, so adding a little sass helps me feel even more powerful when I’m taking care of business. There’s a saying that I keep in the back of my mind when preparing for a meeting: “Be a pair of stilettos in a room of flats.”

On dressing for evening events: I’d describe my style as transitional, and I’m often able to make multiple outfits out of one by swapping pieces. I love the versatility of a great suit — it pairs well with sneakers and a comfortable tee for dropping the kids off or settling down at my desk to dig through my inbox. And then I can add in a silk camisole plus heels for an evening event or night out.

On who she dresses for: As an artist I’m very expressive and connected to how I feel, which makes me an emotional dresser. I don’t like to be overdone or appear to be trying too hard. My clothes have to flow with how I’m feeling or my goals for the day. Whether I’m wearing bright colors and mixing patterns or sporting sleek and muted styles that really flatter my shape, I want to feel confident and comfortable. My clothes are my business card, and they radiate the power and passion I feel inside.

On her style evolution: Dance is a form of communication that doesn’t require speaking, and fashion is the same way. I’ve learned to take risks over time. That could be a leopard-print dress to a client meeting, adding a slick of my Fenty lipstick on a casual Friday, or walking the red carpet at an Ailey gala in a floral suit. I wear what I want, when I want.

On athleisure: It’s a huge part of my life and I’ll often incorporate it into my outfits, or at least keep extra workout clothes at my desk. I’ll throw on leggings and sneakers with my leather jacket so I can jump into the dance studio downstairs after a meeting, or pop over to a yoga class to connect with my spirit after a long week. My go-to right now is Adidas’ Primeknit line — it’s cool, comfortable, and effortless. I also wear a lot of Ailey swag!

