

October 2010

transitions



Denise Jefferson
with Alvin Ailey in an
undated photo

DEATH

Denise Jefferson (1944–2010)

On July 17, Denise Jefferson, director of The Ailey School, died of ovarian cancer. Affectionately known as Ms. J, her warmth and megawatt smile belied the fact that she was the mastermind behind the educational juggernaut for 26 years. In that time, through the continuously burgeoning student body of The Ailey School, her influence permeated the dance world. Eighty-seven percent of current Ailey dancers trained in its school, and former students have gone on to perform with Martha Graham Dance Company, Nederlands Dans Theater, Ballett Frankfurt, Ballet Nacional de España, and on Broadway.

It is hard to imagine that a little brown girl with pigtails standing at Edna L. McRae's ballet barre in Chicago would one day be awarded a scholarship to the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, be accepted into the Pearl Lang Dance Company, then head one of the dance world's most prestigious educational programs. But if you ever had the honor of being in Jefferson's presence you know that, despite her birdlike stature, infectious laugh, and charm, she was stalwart in her demand for excellence, discipline, and respect for the Ailey legacy.

Jefferson traveled the globe offering opportunities for talented dancers to receive world-class training at The Ailey School. Students from 93 countries have participated in the program, making it a cultural ambassador of dance education. In 1998 Jefferson had the foresight to create an artistic and academic pas de deux between The Ailey School and

Fordham University. The result is the Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, offering students the possibility of broadening their options in this ever-changing world.

Like a beautiful pearl cast into calm water, Jefferson's knowledge, devotion, and love for dance will continue to ripple outward for generations to come. Her legacy is carried forth not only by her daughter, the choreographer Francesca Harper, but by the thousands of dancers, teachers, and choreographers she taught or mentored. —*Theresa Ruth Howard*