

In Memoriam Denise Jefferson, director of The Ailey School

Denise Jefferson, who led The Ailey School to international renown during her 26-year tenure as director, died July 17 after a battle with ovarian cancer. She was 65.

Alvin Ailey himself appointed Jefferson to the post in 1984, and in the years that followed, she built the school into the world-class training ground it is today.

"It is a testament to her leadership that 87 percent of current Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater dancers honed their skills through training from The Ailey School," Artistic Director Judith Jamison said in a statement. "Dancers trained under Denise's nurturing direction have also gone on to successful careers in the ranks of other prominent national and international dance companies."

Jefferson, or Ms. J, as she was affectionately called, was known for her tireless dedication and strong vision of quality dance education. She expanded the school's professional and junior divisions, creating programs for children ages 3 and up and instituting



Denise Jefferson
with former
Ailey/Fordham
BFA students

dedicated classes for young boys. In 1995, she forged a partnership with the Professional Performing Arts School, through which talented public high school students received fully subsidized training at The Ailey School.

Three years later Jefferson created the groundbreaking Ailey/Fordham BFA Program, which combines Ailey training with a liberal arts education at Fordham University. More than 160 dancers have graduated from the four-year, full-time program to date.

For now, Ana Marie Forsythe, chair of The Ailey School's Horton department since 1979, has taken the helm of

the Ailey/Fordham program as acting director. Melanie Person and Tracy Inman, co-directors of the Junior Division, have been named acting co-directors of The Ailey School.

"Ms. J was patient and motivational. She always knew the right thing to say during 8:30 am class to make you want to dance all day," says Kile Hotchkiss, recent Ailey/Fordham BFA graduate. "As a mentor she was always open to hearing my concerns and giving kind words as guidance. I hope to influence others with my art the way she has influenced me and so many of my fellow dancers." —Michelle Vellucci