

## At home with Lisa, Quincy and Noah

Chicago may be called the Second City, but it was first in the hearts of dancer and Alvin Ailey Extension director Lisa Johnson-Willingham and her family.

“I love Chicago -- it’s beautiful,” Johnson-Willingham says. “And it’s a great place to raise children.”

The Johnson-Willinghams lived on the South Side of Chicago for 12 years before Lisa was presented with two life-altering events: a painful divorce in from her husband of eight years in 2008 and, in 2011, the chance to move to the New York area to take a director position within Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc., one of the premiere dance organizations in America.

“I’ve been a part of [Alvin Ailey] for over 15 years,” Johnson-Willingham explains. “So when the opportunity arrived, I decided I wanted to continue to be a part of [this] wonderful organization.”

But taking the job as director of the Ailey Extension meant uprooting her two children, Quincy and Noah, ages 9 and 6 respectively, from Chicago to New Jersey. It was a decision Johnson-Willingham didn’t relish making.

“At first, the kids were very sad to leave their home and their family. We had a tight-knit community of friends that became our family,” Johnson-Willingham says. “Transitions are hard for adults, so I can’t imagine being [a kid] and having a major transition in your life.

“They left the only place they’ve ever lived,” she continued. “They left their friends, they left their dad. So transitioning into a new city and a new school... I think that was very hard.”

Johnson-Willingham leaned on her support network on the East Coast -- she’s originally from Washington, D.C. and lived in New York for 12 years before moving to Chicago -- to make the transition as smooth as possible for her kids.

“[I made] sure we had family around us often once we relocated to New York,” Johnson-Willingham says. “My family is located in D.C., so we visited [them] on the weekends often. My mom came up a lot to visit. A lot of my close friends from Chicago often flew here to see them. A couple of times, my daughter’s friends flew to New York to see her, or they flew back to Chicago to see their friends. Their dad was [also] helpful with the transition.”

Now, a year later, Lisa, Quincy and Noah have settled into their life in Jersey City. When Johnson-Willingham isn’t playing with her natural-born performers (“We laugh a lot in my house”), she’s at the office. The 15-year Ailey vet is incredibly passionate about dance (she taught and headed a number of dance programs in Chicago); it makes sense that she’s now helping the storied organization meet its goal of bringing “real dance to real people” through its Extension program.

“I express myself through movement. Dance is my life. It’s who I am,” Johnson-Willingham explains. “I’ve met some amazing, wonderful artists. You get to touch lives, not just in New York City, but from all over the world.” While Quincy and Noah enjoy visiting museums in New York City and doing art projects at home, they probably won’t be joining their mom at the barre anytime soon. Noah loves playing soccer and Quincy is the artist of the family.

“She makes the most incredible pieces of artwork,” Johnson-Willingham says, her voice teeming with pride. “She sees life through art and it’s so beautiful to see. I mean, we could be at the dinner table, and she takes a napkin and just begins to create something out of [it]. By the time dinner is over, she’s like, ‘Look what I’ve made!’”





With an imagination like that, it seems like Johnson-Willingham's biggest hope for her children -- that they dream beyond mental or state borders -- has already set root.

"[I want them to] dream more than others think is practical," she says. "I want them to go beyond their personal limitations, and have fulfillment in life."

Johnson-Willingham is a living example of that wish for her kids.

"You know, today, it was so funny," she says. "My son said, 'You know Mom, I'm really happy that you are happy with your job.' That's beautiful to hear from your child."

### **What made you decide to take the director position in New York City?**

First, to demonstrate to my kids the importance of being ambitious, never settling for less, or allowing society's personal limitations define who you are. I wanted them to never be afraid to leave their comfort zone and instill a sense of self-confidence and passion.

There is a quote from Alvin Ailey that I often try to live by: "To be who you are and become what you are capable of is the only goal worth living." I am a firm believer that there are no coincidences in life and nothing happens by accident. It was the right opportunity, from the right person, at the right moment in my life.

What was the move like?

I had two months to relocate and find a school for the kids to attend during one of the worst snowstorms in Chicago and New York. My mother came to Chicago to help with the kids while I relocated first to secure the school and home for us.

I traveled to Chicago every weekend for two months until the kids' spring break to make the transition seamless for them. I placed both feet steadily on the ground, held on to my faith, and believed. I was blessed to find a school that welcomed Quincy and Noah with open arms; the staff and administration were warm and inviting, and the school continues to be a steady rock for the kids.

### **What's a lesson you've learned from your children?**

When you begin to take care of other people, you find out how important it is to take care of yourself. Like, if mommy isn't happy, then the children can sense it and feel it.

I try to be very practical and really take of myself so I am able to take care of them with the best of me. [When you do that], I think you develop happy children.

Wow. Everything. I think everything. Motherhood is amazing. I love it. A lot of times, we become adults and we forget to laugh, we forget to be silly. [We don't have] the nonchalance that children have about the small things. Small things are important. That's something that I've learned [through my children].

Everyone always says, "Your kids are so funny!" We love to laugh. They're very vocal. They've attended Montessori school [so] they're very independent. They're not afraid to voice their opinions. They have lots of questions, so they're inquisitive. They're risk takers, practical jokers.

They're very dramatic: They create all kinds of movies at home. We play different characters. One of our favorite games to play is switch personalities. So I would be Quincy, Noah would be Mommy, and Quincy would be Noah. We kind of switched around and roleplayed. It's quite fun! And you learn a lot from kids when they do the role-playing as you.

Most people who are around us [notice that] we hug a lot and we kiss a lot -- we say I love you all throughout the day. So they're [also] able to say that to their cousins and their grandmother, and their friends, uncles and aunts. I teach them about love.

**Fill in the blank. I love being a mom most when \_\_\_\_\_?**

... When I see my children happy. When I see me in them, [in] their spirits.

I love being a mom when I see my children communicate and relate to their friends and family. I feel like they have great spirits, and it makes me proud. It makes me proud to be their mom. The one thing I do hear about Quincy all the time is that she's so caring of her friends, very helpful, and a leader in class.

**What's the best piece of advice you've received from your mom or the moms in your life?**

I think for me it would be expecting more than others think is possible.

**You lived in New York for 12 years before you got engaged and moved to Chicago in 1999. How is living in New York different now that you have kids?**

Well, instead of going to see dance concerts and hanging out at venues and everything, we're going to see Spiderman, Lion King, and Mary Poppins on Broadway, and going to the Rockefeller Center to see the lighting of the Christmas tree. [I've been taking] advantage of the other part of New York I wasn't interested in when I lived here 12 years ago.

**What inspires your personal style?**

My mood, usually how I'm feeling that day. I don't really have a style. I don't wear jewelry. I like the classic look though, I like clean lines.

**Is that from being a dancer?**

I think so. I've always liked clean lines, linear looks.

**How do you feel about dancing?**

From seeing people come [to the Alvin Ailey Extension], [I know] dance builds self-esteem, relieves stress, [and gets people to] start living a healthier life.

Dance heals the spirit [and] develops the mind, body, and spirit. We have people from all walks of life come here and dance and be inspired. I think a lot of times, [when you're going through] your toughest times in life -- dance. Go on a run, play some music, and dance.

What inspires the way you dress your kids?

[With] my daughter, we fight a lot because she's an artist, so she likes to be very creative with her choices. I try to guide her through [and] it doesn't work. I think I lose on the fight about that, but I try to dress her. I like the Gap, and she likes to put different colors together and different patterns. Her favorites mix and match and I'm more like "Blue should be with blue."

**And what about Noah?**

Noah, he's a jean, T-shirt kind of guy.

**What kind of man do you hope your son becomes, and what kind of woman do you hope your daughter becomes?**

I hope they both become risk takers. I know as an African-American male, my son will have some obstacles, but I hope he can think beyond those and tear down those walls. [As for] my daughter, a lot of times when I say, "She's an artist," a lot of people say, "Ugh," or "Oh no, you should make her interested in something else."

I think your destiny is your destiny, and when God gives you a talent, no one can deny it. If she becomes an artist, Mommy would be proud. I think it's about fulfillment for her. The woman I want her to be is the woman she wants to be, and I will support her a hundred percent. I want her to be independent. I want her to be practical.



For me I often incorporate my children in my job. When my children were young, I taught dance class with my son on my chest in the little Kangaroo. And he would sleep the entire time. The drums were playing, and at the very end of the class, the drums would stop, and his head would pop up. My son and my daughter go to performances with me, and they perform, so I go to see their performances. I think it depends on the decisions that you make in life, from the beginning, [from] their birth, to now, or until they're 14, or until they're 18, or until they're 45. It's the decisions that you make -- planting the seeds, and planting all the things that you expect and want from them.

Having incredible support, I think, is [also] very important. I think you can have it all if you have the support that you need.

### **What do you think about the idea that a woman can't have it all?**

I just don't address that. I think I am a woman that has it all. I have beautiful children that I'm happy with, I have an incredible job, I'm in an amazing relationship. I just think that's someone's personal opinion. Who has it all?

I don't think of separating a man and a woman, you know, "women are from Venus, and men are from Mars." Everybody as a human [has] up and downs, your difficulties, your successes. I think [the key is to] work hard and love what you do. What is success to someone? I think your decision of your success completes your world and what you expect.