

February 28, 2011

**Members Project Winners: Kiva, Alvin Ailey American, A Better Chance, Defenders of Wildlife, AIDS Healthcare Foundation**



Kiva gives the possibility of weaving a better life. (Photo courtesy of John Briggs)

It's a simple concept: American Express wanted to find a way to help its cardmembers give back to the organizations doing good in the world. In 2007, UNICEF received \$2 million to help provide clean water in four African countries. In 2008, cardmembers voted to give \$1.5 million to fund Alzheimer's research. For the past 12 weeks, members of the public have been voting on TakePart.com to decide which of 48 organizations in five categories should take home \$200,000. It's called [Members Project](#). See the five great groups you chose.

## ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

**ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER** ([AlvinAiley.org](#))

When Alvin Ailey founded his now famous dance company in 1958, there were few opportunities to see African American cultural performers on stage.

But his groundbreaking company, created to celebrate and develop an African American dance tradition, has grown into a cultural powerhouse in the U.S. and the world.

Despite worldwide accolades—a recent Scottish reviewer [wrote](#) of the company's "intoxicating blend of technically strong dancers and intelligent yet accessible choreography"—the [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#) is still a nonprofit arts organization.

Which means that the Members Project prize is a "huge" gift to the organization, according to Bennett Rink, the senior director for development and external affairs.

"We always talk about what Mr. Ailey said, which is that 'dance came from the people, and it should always be delivered back to the people,'" Rink tells TakePart. "So this award will allow us to continue doing that, and to even broaden what we're doing."

Alvin Ailey hosts a variety of programs that break down the wall between the audience and the company and bring American dance into everyone's lives.

For New York City residents, the Ailey Extension offers what the organization affectionately calls "real classes for real people."

"As our Artistic Director, Judith Jamison said, 'If you can walk in the door, you can take a class,'" Rink says. The Ailey Extension offers more than 75 classes a week on everything from samba to hip hop to ballet to West African dance.

Ailey dancers have been active around the country, offering years of camps and classroom performances for students and community groups.

"Before there was this buzz word 'arts in education,' Alvin Ailey was sending his dancers into the schools, into the communities, for people who couldn't come to a performance," Rink says. "We have Ailey Camps, which are summer day camps, for inner city youth in 10 cities around the country. We use the camps to help these young people experience their own creativity, boost their self-esteem, and feel better about themselves and the world."

Camp tuition, uniforms, dance attire, meals, field trips and transportation are all provided to the campers free of charge. During the summer of 2010, camps were held in Atlanta, Kansas City (Kansas and Missouri), Berkeley, Boston, Bridgeport (Connecticut), Miami, Chicago, and Washington Heights and Staten Island in New York City.

*TAKEPART: [Join the dance](#) by supporting Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater or finding a performance near you.*

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**KIVA** (Kiva.org)

Kiva's message that making a loan changes a life has proven to be one of the most effective dictums for alleviating global poverty. The nonprofit enables anyone with a giving heart and Internet access to connect and make a personal loan to entrepreneurs and students a half a world away. You can choose to lend to entrepreneurs like Sophea, a mother in Cambodia who needed silk materials for her weaving business, or Yenku, a Sierra Leonean shop owner. Rebel soldiers cut off Yenku's hands during the country's 11-year civil war. His life felt hopeless until he was given a loan to start a retail store. Today, he is a successful business owner selling everything from clothes to food and drinks.

Kiva was thrilled to learn it was one of the Members Project winners. Premal Shah, president of Kiva.org said, "We at Kiva have been blown away by the abundance of generosity that made this gift possible." He is grateful to American Express and TakePart and inspired by the Kiva community who "stepped up and made this all possible with a huge surge of voting."

With the \$200,000, Kiva plans to expand its reach in 2011. The goal is to raise an additional \$87 million in loans to 241,000 entrepreneurs, thereby engaging 146,000 lenders. The group will also tap into innovative loan categories, such as water and green energy.

*TAKEPART: [Make a loan to change a life](#).*

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**DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE** (defendersofwildlife.org)

"The staff is extremely excited," says Dianne Clifford, senior vice president for marketing and constituent development for [Defenders of Wildlife](#). "I think everyone really felt part of the campaign, and we're all just thrilled."

For more than 60 years, the organization, which began as Defenders of Furbearers in 1947, has used a four-pronged approach—education, policy analysis, advocacy, and litigation—to bring positive change in the natural world.

The group and its passionate 500,000 member base has improved, or saved, the lives of almost too many species to count. Parrots in Mexico. Prairie dogs in Wyoming. Caribou in Idaho. Sea turtles in the Gulf of Mexico. And, most recently, bison in the Northern Rockies.

In fact, "the bison example is one where we engaged our on-line community," says Clifford. "The same way that our on-line supporters helped us win the [Members Project] vote, they helped us save some bison."

Citing a “great need, but never enough resources,” Clifford says that the winning funds would most likely be used to “restore the gray wolf to the Northern Rockies ecosystem and to several projects that would help wolves and humans co-exist.”

*TAKEPART: [Help block anti-wildlife legislation in the Senate.](#)*

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**A BETTER CHANCE**

**A BETTER CHANCE** ([ABetterChance.org](http://ABetterChance.org))

First-generation Haitian-American Marie-Fatima Hyacinthe, born and raised in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, graduated from high school in the spring of 2010 and was shocked by the number of college acceptances she had to choose from. Brown, Harvard, Johns Hopkins and Yale were vying for her enrollment. She chose Harvard.

Hyacinthe’s story is not unheard of in America, but its the narrative of choice at [A Better Chance](#), an educational nonprofit where “work is guided by the principle that talent resides in every community,” says Anny Chen, development and marketing associate.

Thousands of underrepresented youth like Hyacinthe have the organization to thank for steering their lives in a direction they might have thought impossible. Recruiting, referring and placing 450 students in the most prestigious independent schools each year through a college preparatory program, A Better Chance transforms the lives of students of color who lack the resources and guidance to realize their demonstrable potential.

Grammy award-winner [Tracy Chapman](#) can trace her success back to A Better Chance. So can [Deval Patrick](#), the first African American governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Now with \$200,000 in Members Project winnings, A Better Chance can expand its reach. The money, says Chen, will “open the doors to even more talented young people of color” and put the organization a step closer to its goal of creating a “life network” to support scholars and alumni well past graduation day.

*TAKEPART: [Volunteer to help give someone A Better Chance.](#)*

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**AIDS HEALTHCARE FOUNDATION** ([aidshealth.org](http://aidshealth.org))

As the Largest community-based HIV/AIDS medical provider in the United States, [AIDS Healthcare Foundation](#) (AHF) serves more than 152,000 patients at home and in 26 nations abroad—regardless of their ability to pay.

Those patients include Katya, a 29-year-old project manager in Kiev who gave birth to a healthy child last year after receiving treatment at an AHF clinic in Ukraine.

They also include Julius and his young son Jude. Julius and Jude won't let their HIV-positive diagnosis bar them from a thriving life, thanks to regular doctor visits at an AHF clinic in rural Masaka District in Uganda.

Lori Yeghiayan, AHF's associate director of communications, says that the Members Project award will provide crucial funding for the treatment and care that so many people rely on.

"In many African nations, lifesaving AIDS treatment can be provided for as little as \$300 per patient per year," she says. The Members Project prize "could provide more than 600 people living with HIV/AIDS medical care for one year." Closer to home, AHF may use the funds to bolster their community outreach and testing services, such as mobile HIV testing that reaches rural, minority and underserved populations across America.

"This can be a lifesaving service, as early detection and linkage to care are key to improved outcomes for HIV-positive individuals."

*TAKEPART: [Save a life and support AHF.](#)*