

**Monday, June 29, 2009**  
**Small Steps, Big Dreams**  
**By Vincent M. Mallozzi**

**Earl Wilson/The New York Times**  
**Children auditioned for the New York Theater Ballet School on Wednesday.**

Diana Byer spent the better part of Thursday night helping to point the toes of needy children in the right direction.

"I certainly want to turn these students into good dancers," said Ms. Byer, the founder and artistic director of the New York Theater Ballet. "But more importantly, I want to turn them into good citizens."

Ms. Byer began putting those goals in motion 20 years ago with the creation of Lift, an outreach program that sends disadvantaged children to her ballet school for a week of tryouts. The most promising among the incoming troupe receive scholarships to Ballet School NY, the official academy of the New York Theater Ballet.

"The idea is to create professional dancers who will one day join our company or other companies around the world," Ms. Byer said. "It's a very healthy competition."

On Thursday, nine aspiring dancers, eight girls and one boy, ages 6 to 9, were hoping to make the difficult leap, trying to grasp complicated techniques like the grand battement, a large kick in which the leg is raised to hip level and held straight, and the fifth position, where both feet touch and the toes of each foot reaches the heel of the other.

All nine students survived an initial tryout earlier in the week in which 18 others were turned away. "I hope I make it," J'Cree Sanders, a 9-year-old from Harlem said shortly after Thursday's tryout. "When I grow up, I want to dance at the Apollo."

Dequasha Thomas, also 9 and living in Harlem, had visions of dancing on an even grander stage. "I want to perform on Broadway," she said.

The two girls, wearing dark tutus and matching smiles, were hoping to be back on the hardwood floor Sept. 14, stretching, twirling and leaping on the opening day of classes at the prestigious school, where many of its 125 students are dreaming of becoming the next Steven Melendez.

Mr. Melendez, now 22, was an 8-year-old living in a Bronx homeless shelter when he earned a ballet scholarship through the Lift program. He eventually joined



the New York Theater Ballet, and is now the lead dancer with the Estonian National Ballet.

Perhaps the next student to follow in Mr. Melendez's ballet slippers is Tiffany Cordero, 14, who came to the academy through the Lift program as a 10-year-old. Earlier this year, Ms. Cordero was the recipient of a two-year Van Lier Fellowship, which provides support for gifted children who are seriously dedicated to a career in the arts.

"I want to do the whole Broadway thing — singing, acting and dancing," said Ms. Cordero, a sophomore at the High School for Arts, Imagination and Inquiry in Manhattan, where she lives. "For students of all ages, ballet builds character and discipline, qualities you can always take with you out in the real world."

Ms. Byer was looking for those qualities, among others, during a series of drills and routines on Thursday, including a final exercise in which each student leaped over a long stick she held out in front of them.

"I'm also looking for flexibility, imagination, musicality, courage and the ability to adapt in an unfamiliar setting," she said.

When it was over, she found those qualities in Dequasha and J'Cree — and in each of the other seven children.

"All of them are getting scholarships," Ms. Byer announced. "It's rare that this happens, but this is a very talented group."

The Ballet School academy parallels the academic year, starting this September through June 2010.

J'Cree and Dequasha, within earshot of that announcement, gave each other a high-five.

"I was kind of nervous," J'Cree said.

"Me, too," Dequasha replied. "I need to get to Broadway."

Extend your love to others, & watch it grow...

## Projects Together

"My passion is performing, but working with the children in **New York Theatre Ballet's LIFT Community Service Program** has given me a different way to express my love of dance," says **Elena Zahlmann**, a principal dancer for 10 sea-



Elena with JCree & DeQuasha

sons and assistant teacher at the school.

"I currently work twice a week with the class for children between the ages of eight and 11," says Elena. "This year we have three new girls from the LIFT Program. They have not taken ballet lessons before and I am there to give one-on-one attention

and teach them the basics of ballet.

"I also engage them outside of the classroom by talking to them about their day, what books they are reading, or what music they're listening to. It's important to make a connection and show a genuine interest in their lives."

New York Theatre Ballet was founded in 1978 by **Diana Byer**, and is the most widely seen chamber ballet company in the United States. Diana also started the LIFT Community Service Program in 1991, which boasts over 650 alumni, provides scholarships for dance classes, and helps with food, clothing, books, and medical care for New York City's shelter children.

"The lives of the children in the LIFT program are enriched when they have a mentor, an adult friend who takes the child out once a month or so to movies, sports games, dinner, or arts events," says Diana. "The program also welcomes socially connected individuals to help generate new ideas for fund-raising and to assist in the activities.

"Mentoring is something that you can do with your fiancé, your husband, or on your own. You can experience being a child again and prepare for parenthood, all while building a relationship with a new friend."

Diana stresses that this can't be a temporary avocation. She asks mentors to commit to a long-term relationship, from childhood through adolescence. "We encourage the mentor to meet with the child at least once a month, taking them to cultural events or to dinner, making sure their homework is done in a timely manner and that they maintain good grades at school," says Diana. "Too many people are transient in these children's lives, so a true commitment for the long-term is essential."

"Working with the children in the LIFT program has given me the gift of watching how quickly they grow when they are given a chance. I see not only their bodies getting stronger, but their attitudes changing as well. With some caring and encouragement, their confidence grows and they enjoy dancing and the work that is put into it which carries over to all aspects of their lives. It's a privilege to be a part of their lives and the program."

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Elena performing in Cinderella.

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## A Truly Fairy-Tale Prince

By Liesl Schillinger

*The New York Times*

Sunday, December 12, 2003

When Diana Byer, the artistic director of New York Theatre Ballet, found Steven Melendez at a homeless shelter in the Bronx 10 years ago, he did not look like a future Nutcracker Prince. "I was 7, I had never danced, and I didn't know a lot about ballet," said Mr. Melendez, now 17, as he took a break from rehearsing with Clara and the Flowers for the company's performances of "The Nutcracker" this weekend and next. "I liked football."

In 1989, Ms. Byer initiated an outreach program called LIFT, which brings disadvantaged children to her ballet school for a week of classes. At the end, promising students are given scholarships and integrated into the larger student body. In 1993, Mr. Melendez hadn't made the cut. "He seemed completely uninterested," Ms. Byer recalled. But on the last day, as children filed onto the bus back to the Bronx, Mr. Melendez wrapped himself around the leg of an instructor, held on tight and kicked so he wouldn't have to leave. "So I offered him a scholarship, and that's how it started," Ms. Byer said.

The next year, Mr. Melendez played a mouse in Ms. Byer's "Nutcracker," in succeeding seasons, while attending her school, the Manhattan County School and, later, the Professional Children's School, on scholarships, he graduated to bigger roles; this is his first turn as the lead. Six feet tall, broad-shouldered, courtly and serene, Mr. Melendez dances with power and sweetness; his lifts look effortless, his jumps are airy yet controlled, and he blows a kiss to each Flower as if he sees her particular grace. He has already won spots on competitive summer programs at the San Francisco and Houston Ballets, and performed the lead child's role in the Kirov Ballet's "Sleeping Beauty" at the Metropolitan Opera House. In January, he auditions for a coveted place in next summer's programs at American Ballet Theatre and the Boston Ballet.



Photo: Richard Termine

Mr. Melendez said he particularly loves "Sleeping Beauty" and "Swan Lake": "I could see them a hundred times." But if he could dance any role, it would be the slave Ali in "Le Corsaire." "It's a love triangle between a male slave, a pirate and a female slave, and it's a really manly dance," he explained. "There's a lot of jumping and spinning and turning. It's a big piece that I'd like to dance on a big stage, because you need space to do it; vertical space because it's got a lot of jumping, but also width and length and depth because there's so much going on.

He doesn't like to think about what might have happened if Ms. Byer hadn't found him. "At 7, I was fine, but my life had the potential to get really ugly. I'm glad it didn't," he said. "Dancing is something that I really love. But being happy; that's something I really like, too."

## Projects Together

### Extend your love to others, and watch it grow: Mentoring in the City

“I came here to help others, and found a rewarding relationship with an incredible young woman and a wonderful program,” says Traer Price, a designer who mentors with The New York Theatre Ballet LIFT Study Program.

Started in 1991 by Diana Byer the program helps homeless and at-risk children. Boasting over 650 alumni, the program provides scholarships for dance classes, and helps with food, clothing, books, medical care for New York City’s shelter children.

Several years ago Traer attended an event where Diana was being honored. “I was so impressed by Diana’s work that I introduced myself,” says Traer. “She asked if I’d be interested in mentoring one of the children. The next thing I knew, Loretta Young was sitting at my table, and we hit it off immediately.”

The lives of the children in the program are enriched when they have a mentor, an adult friend who takes the child out once a month or so to the movies, sports, games, dinner, or arts events. The program also welcomes socially connected individuals to help generate new ideas for fundraising and to assist in the activities.

“I wanted to share some of the incredible experience’s I’ve been blessed to have,” says Traer. “I relate best one-on-one with people, and I hadn’t quite found my volunteering niche until I met Diana. I also knew that my life-long interest in dance would be a great common ground to build a relationship with Loretta.” She spent time with Loretta in ways that would expand her artistic sensibility and also improve her academic performance. At the beginning of their relationship they attended art-related events around in the city. Over time, when she began to understand Loretta’s interests and needs, Traer took her to lectures at Columbia University and ice skating at Chelsea Piers, among other things.

“This winter I thought it would be nice for both of us to get out of the city and go snowboarding in

Massachusetts,” explains Traer. “I’d gone years ago, but I had forgotten much about the sport. Loretta had never been snowboarding before, so we were at the mercy of our 16-year old instructor. My initial response was frustration and humiliation, as I was on the ground 99 percent of the time. Loretta was equally unsuccessful, but she laughed it off and kept trying. I took her lead and had a great time the rest of the day.”

“Being a part of this program has allowed me to gain more respect for myself and for others,” says Loretta. “Miss Byer (what the students call her) insists upon good manners and has taught me how to carry myself like a young lady. I’ve learned to see the value of discipline and determination, and how necessary those qualities are to be successful.

“I’ve been given an amazing opportunity to get an education and study dance. Miss Byer and Traer will never know how much they mean to me.”

Mentoring is something that you can do with your fiancé, your husband, or on your own. You can experience being a child again and prepare for parenthood, all while building a relationship with a new friend. Traer and her husband Steve, for example, often spend time together with Loretta. Steve’s career in theatrical set design combines well with Loretta’s interests in performance. “We make a natural threesome,” says Traer.

Diana stresses that this can’t be a temporary avocation. She asks you to commit to a long-term relationship, from childhood through adolescence.

“I never feel that I’m doing something for Loretta,” says Traer. “It’s been clear from the start that we’re giving to each other. I’m learning as much as she is, while discovering new facets of myself. This makes our relationship balanced, spontaneous, and endlessly rewarding. My relationship with Loretta is one I feel privileged to have.”

—Elizabeth Condaxis



Photo: Rick Bard