

Bronx student dances at White House

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Max Mitchell

An 11-year-old Tinton Avenue resident recently experienced a highlight in his young dance career, as he visited the White House and participated in the Obama Administration's first event celebrating dance.

On September 7, Matthew Santiago traveled to Washington D.C. with five other students from the National Dance Institute to practice in a workshop taught by leading dance professionals.

Afterwards, the kids were treated to a performance by the dancers, which First Lady Michelle Obama attended.

"It was a great experience for me," Santiago said. "It was so much fun."

About 80 kids from all over the country got to dance in the 90-minute workshop, which was held in the spacious, chandelier-studded East Room of the White House.

The students were taught dance pieces by famous choreographer George Balanchine and moves by, among others, the Billy Elliots, a group that performs on Broadway.

Santiago was a little disappointed that the first lady did not see his performance. But he did learn a variety of moves he'd never tried before.

"During the trip I learned a little bit of hip-hop and some ballet. The hip-hop was kind of tough, but the ballet was very smooth," he said. "Other moves were kind of complicated. They were in a different style than I usually do, but they were still really fun."

Dancing since he was only a few years old, Santiago said he likes all kinds of dance, including jazz, ballet and tap. About three years ago he became more serious and began attending the Bronx Dance Academy after he graduated from P.S. 161.

"Dancing is a way I can express my feelings," he said. "I want to be an actor and a dancer and I want to perform on Broadway."

Although it was the first time in the capitol for Santiago, it was not the first time students with NDI performed at the White House.

"We performed twice for President Clinton and once for Laura Bush," said Ellen Weinstein, artistic director of NDI.

According to Weinstein, a White House official attended an NDI performance in January. The official was so impressed he invited the institute to bring along kids for the performance and workshop.

Out of the 200 students involved in NDI's New York City program, only six were chosen to go to the Capitol.

"We selected them based on their commitment to dance, their ability to performance and their energy," Weinstein said. "We chose those we felt would truly represent the dance institute."

The rare opportunity gave students a chance to learn about dance from the best of the best, and all of them performed well, Weinstein said.

"I think it's an experience they will remember forever," she said.

"And at school the next day, they all had a lot to say when someone asked, 'So what did you do on your summer vacation?'"