

# Arts & Entertainment

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## NDI: There is a rose in East Harlem

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Special to the AmNews

There is a rose in East Harlem where hundreds of youngsters learn ballet, tap, modern dance, music, choreography and more while experiencing “a love of the arts, a passion for learning and a desire to strive for their personal best.” The name of the rose is the National Dance Institute.

Founded in 1976 by New York City Ballet principal dancer Jacques d’Amboise, NDI impacts millions of children with its joyful, rigorous and intellectually engaging programs. A team that includes d’Amboise as founder and president, Executive Director Tracie Lester and Artistic Director Ellen Weinstein, heads it. On a recent hot summer day, Weinstein conducted a tour of the well-appointed NDI building nestled on West 147th Street between Frederick Douglass and Adam Clayton Powell boulevards which was once PS 90, where Dance Theatre of Harlem cofounder former NYCB principal Arthur Mitchell went to school. An auspicious location if ever there was one.

A former dancer with a diverse background that includes performing with the Garden State Ballet and the late African-American modern dancer/choreographer Joan Miller’s company, Weinstein has been with NDI for over two decades. Enthusiastically, she describes NDI’s dance program: “Think about how the arts unite children around a shared goal and they care about each other and support each other and celebrate each other. Also, the arts engage emotion and once emotion is engaged, there’s no better way to learn and get excited about learning.

“Our first contact with the children is our In-School Program that is the heart and soul of NDI. We send a teaching team into the city’s public schools with the help of principals who see the value of a program like this.” Based on a web of partnerships NDI is



in 41 NYC city schools and services over 6,500 students from kindergarten through fifth grade.

NDI’s full-year programs consist of weekly classes from October through May/June with classes during the school day that make dance an integral part of kids’ learning process. Classes include live music and cap the experience with a celebratory final performance that allows students to show off their skills with a “fully-realized theatrical production” complete with an ensemble of musicians, colorful backdrops and costumes designed by the children.

The summer program currently in session is an extension of that In-School

Program, Weinstein explains. It is a free two-week dance and music program with classes that run from July 29 through Aug. 8 which allow kids to further experience high-energy and engaging dance and music classes taught by a team of NDI master teachers and musicians who take kids on a thrilling, creative journey culminating in a performance. It’s free of charge and no previous dance or music experience is required.

The day of Weinstein’s tour, the kids at the portable ballet barres in one of the studios, or hoofing enthusiastically in another and crouching close to the floor doing a jazz routine that looks like something out of West Side Story

in another, are the 200 extraordinarily talented and motivated students drawn from the In-School Program enjoying scholarships for advanced training. Weinstein says they come from throughout the city “to work as an ensemble, celebrating each other’s achievements and forming lifelong bonds.”

One energetic youngster in the SWAT team named Tyler Myers, who says he wants to be a dancer, epitomizes the group of youngsters who proved themselves to be “hungry for more” and were chosen to belong to what’s called the SWAT Team (Scholarships for the Willing, Achieving and Talented). SWAT dancers gather at the NDI Center for intensive in-

struction every Saturday from January through June, from 10 a.m.-1 p.m.. During the school year, they continue to participate in the In-School Program, serving as role models for their peers. Like Tyler, SWAT dancers tackle even more advanced choreography and even perform in what’s called the Event of the Year program, “a theme-based event fully-realized theatrical event at Skirball with a live band, professional costume,” which Weinstein says “surrounds children with a sense of what it is like to take something from the studio and bring it to the stage.” That’s a big turning point. Then from there they’re invited to join the summer program and from there they’re invited back to participate in something called the Celebration Team.

Call it the circle of dance as each experience builds to yet another more advanced one, as NDI offers kids a rich series of stepping stones from the SWAT Team to the Celebration Team, a semi-professional performance ensemble that’s performed at such prestigious venues as Lincoln Center and the Kennedy Center, to something called the Irene Diamond Summer Institute, an even more rigorous schedule of modern, jazz, tap, music and choreography. There is also a DREAM project for children (ages 8 to 14) of all abilities, including dancers who are deaf and hard-of-hearing, dancers who are blind and visually impaired.

While Weinstein notes that NDI’s rich programming isn’t specifically designed to create dancers, some have gone on to LaGuardia High School, or come back as teaching artists, but many go on with their lives enriched, she says “by the confidence, self-awareness and understanding the value of rigor and discipline” they learned thanks to NDI, a rose blooming in East Harlem. For more information about how to enjoy this wealth of artistic riches, visit their website at

<http://nationaldance.org/>