

Jordan Levin JULY 17, 2015

Michaela DePrince's journey from war to ballet stardom inspires Miami Gardens dancers



Michaela DePrince, center, who has gone from Sierra Leone war orphan to international ballerina, teaching at BE Dance Studios in Miami Gardens, Florida on July 14, 2015. | **CARL JUSTE**

BY JORDAN LEVIN

jlevin@MiamiHerald.com

The extraordinary arc of Michaela DePrince's life has taken her from African war orphan to international ballerina and cultural heroine. And on this weekday morning, in a small dance studio in a Miami Gardens strip mall, she is teaching determination and hope to 10 aspiring young dancers, along with how to hold their arms and point their feet.

"Trust yourself," says DePrince, urging the students, eight girls and two boys, to let go of the practice barre and balance on one trembling leg. "You can let go. If you fall, you fall. At least you tried." As they struggle with a series of jumps, she pushes them harder. "Go forward!!" she calls. "Forward, not backward!!"

Perseverance and strength of spirit have been as important as luck and talent for DePrince, 20. Her dramatic story led to her being featured in the 2011 ballet documentary *First Position* and to appear on *Dancing with the Stars*. She has written an autobiography, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina* and done a TEDx talk about her experience. In Europe, where she dances with the Dutch National Ballet, she is a celebrity.

She is also committed to using her fame to help young African-American dancers like those at BE Dance Studios in Miami Gardens, where she spent the past week teaching and speaking. She hopes to inspire them to overcome obstacles, whether it be insecurity about their bodies or talent, difficult circumstances or the prejudice that enshrines pale, pristine ballerinas.

"I've always wanted to be a role model, especially to young black girls," says DePrince, who has taught at schools in Brooklyn and South Africa. "I think I can inspire them to ... just push and believe in yourself and become whatever you want. I've been through so much, but I was able to go forward to what I've always believed in."

International ballerina Michaela DePrince teaches class in Miami Gardens

She is a heroine here. Studio owner Perpetua “Peppie” Phillips took her students to see *First Position*, which focuses on DePrince and other competitors at an elite ballet competition. Photos of her and Misty Copeland, another famous African-American ballerina, decorate the studio. On Monday evening, several dozen girls, from 3 year olds in sparkly pink dresses to earnest teenagers, crowded the studio for a book signing and talk.

“I didn’t believe she was actually coming,” says Regina Delancy, 13, who took class with DePrince this week. “It’s an honor and a great experience for someone as great as her to be here and to teach us what she knows. If she can make it that far she can show other people they can do the same.”

DePrince's story is as horrific and miraculous as that of any enchanted swan queen or princess. Born in a small village in Sierra Leone in west Africa, she was 3 when her father was killed by rebel soldiers in a massacre at the mine where he worked. The uncle who grudgingly took in DePrince and her mother gave them so little to eat that the mother, who often gave her food to her daughter, died of starvation. The uncle took DePrince to an orphanage, where the female caretakers abused her and called her a devil's child because of white blotches on her skin, caused by a skin condition called vitiligo. She watched a gang of rebel soldiers kill the teacher who was the only woman who was kind to her, slashing open her pregnant belly and threatening to kill DePrince when she protested.

Hope literally flew into her life when the wind blew an old copy of Dance Magazine against the bars of the orphanage gate. On the cover was a photograph of a ballerina in a pink tutu. And DePrince, who had never seen a white person, much less a ballet dancer, latched onto the image.

"I can't explain it," DePrince says. "It was this beautiful creature, like a fairy, a light I'd never seen. It was the thought that if I could be that person, I could be happy."

Her real fairy godmother was Elaine DePrince, a middle-aged American woman who decided to adopt a girl from Sierra Leone after two other boys she had adopted died of AIDS. (She and her husband have adopted nine of their 11 children.) Once again chance intervened in Michaela's life. A confused worker at the adoption agency asked DePrince which Mabinty she was taking, Mabinty Suma, another girl in the orphanage, or Mabinty Bangura, Michaela's African name. Twelve American families had refused Bangura, the worker said, worried her spotted skin would cause self-esteem issues.

DePrince said she'd take both girls. When she picked up her new daughters in Africa, she realized 4-year-old Michaela didn't suffer from lack of confidence.

"She was stubborn, feisty, incredibly intuitive and bright," says DePrince, 68, from her home in Fayetteville, Georgia. "She was this itty, bitty little thing. But she was full of spunk. She had had to stand up for herself. But I think she was not just forced to be this way — she was born this way."

Folded inside Michaela's ragged clothes was the picture of the ballerina, which the child showed to her astonished new mother, twirling around the hotel room on her bare toes.

“She searched the luggage for pink satin pointe shoes,” DePrince says. “I could not believe it.”

Michaela does not describe any of this as luck.

“I was given an opportunity to believe in myself —I found a magazine with a picture of a ballerina,” she says. “When I was adopted I got another amazing opportunity – to be surrounded by so much love and to know what it is to be loved.”

Her mother says she also needed that love.

“My husband and I had holes in our hearts after the death of our boys, and these girls were so needy for family,” she says. “They filled those holes and we filled their spaces.”

DePrince soon fulfilled Michaela’s dream of ballet lessons. She progressed rapidly, and at the 2010 Youth America Grand Prix, the subject of *First Position*, earned a full scholarship to the school of American Ballet Theatre. The film brought her a flood of media attention. (Recently, a European TV show staged a meeting between DePrince and the ballerina on the magazine cover, Magali Messac.)

But she also heard parents and teachers saying black girls were too “brutish” and heavy to dance ballet. The only American ballet troupe that would take her was Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH). When the director of the Dutch National Ballet called her into his office after her audition, she prepared a speech saying she understood why she hadn’t been accepted. Her lean, muscular body still doesn’t fit many people’s ideal image of a delicate, willowy ballerina.

At her Monday book signing, DePrince spoke about how she still faces obstacles.

“If you keep fighting you will be OK,” she told the crowd. “There are still times where people make fun of how I look and how I dance. You don’t have to have the perfect body to change the world.”

The girls lining up for her signature and to pose for photos were inspired and indignant at her story. “It makes me feel sad because there’s a lot of good black dancers out there and there’s so much hate and racism people won’t see how good we are,” said Monica Oliver, 12, one of BE Studios more advanced students, who attended DTH’s Summer Intensive last year. “If I ever encounter that I’ll just have hope. I like ballet best.”

Helping girls like Oliver is why Phillips, 34, opened BE Studios in 2009. “BE — like be yourself, be wonderful, be great,” she says. Raised in Miami Gardens, she studied dance at the magnet program at Miami Northwestern Senior High School (where Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, also got his start), and graduated from Ohio State University, which has a highly regarded dance program, on a scholarship.

Though she loved ballet, Phillips believes she was pushed toward modern dance because of her color and build. When she came home to start her school, she found parents were sometimes skeptical about a studio that didn’t offer hip hop and required students to wear uniform leotards and hair in a neat bun. But she has persisted, taking her students to performances by Ailey, DTH and Miami City Ballet, insisting that studying dance can be a route to a career, not just to self-esteem or better grades.

“I try my best so that they don’t feel they can’t do this because they’re black,” she says. “To make sure they understand [racism] exists but that they should press on.”

The example of DePrince and Copeland, whose recent promotion to principal dancer at ABT got widespread attention, has made Phillips’ task easier.

“Michaela is a step to pushing our program to where it will be in 20 or 30 years,” she says. “When it comes time for [the students] to get through the door, [racism] shouldn’t be their issue. This is what we’re fighting for right now.”

At her Tuesday morning class, DePrince confronts more mundane issues. The sounds of construction and booming music come through the walls, sometimes threatening to overwhelm the music on her iPhone. Her flight from the Netherlands on Sunday has left her jet lagged and with a sore throat, and Skyler Maxey, her boyfriend of several years, hovers nearby with a supply of cough drops. DePrince talks repeatedly about shaping their feet and hands — “you’re not holding a hamburger!” — and connecting with the audience.

“I’m here! I’m dancing for you!” The students seem nervous, now concentrated, now giggling, and toward the end of the two-hour session DePrince grows impatient.

“Guys, I’m not trying to be mean,” she says. “But if I tell you and tell you something, I need you to do it.”

As far as she has come, DePrince’s early traumas are still with her. The nightmares she had as a child still plague her, and shouting male voices still frighten her. When she and her sister were young, their mother persuaded them to recount their experiences, which she

wrote down. DePrince defiantly told her mother that she would only tell those stories once. Yet her celebrity has meant she must tell them over and over.

“It can be very hard,” DePrince says. “But I’ve been given something so special to override that. To be able to dance is my way of speaking out. It has helped me so much to deal with all the things I’ve been through.”

IF YOU GO

What: "Dance & Decadence" party and performance with Michaela DePrince and BE Dance Studio students

When: 6 to 9 p.m. Friday

Where: Betty T. Ferguson Recreational Complex, 3000 NW 199th St., Miami Gardens

Info: Free; Information at bedancestudios.org or bedancestudios@gmail.com, or 305-624-0110

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