

Style Blog

Orphan No. 27 pirouettes to stardom

By Sarah Kaufman July 21

What does Michaela DePrince have left to conquer? As a 4-year-old orphan in Sierra Leone, the thought of being adopted made her physically sick, but she overcame her fear to enjoy a loving family life in New Jersey. At the orphanage she'd been called "the devil child" because of a skin condition called vitiligo, which created a mottled appearance on her neck and chest, but she resolutely pursued the skin-baring art of ballet.

Her mother hand-dyed her tights and pointe shoes to match her skin color, but being the only black girl at the barre and being passed over for roles "was very difficult," [DePrince, 20, tells the August issue of Glamour magazine](#). She is featured in a two-page spread as one of its "Glamour Women."

It's an accurate title: DePrince, wearing a lacy Maison Margiela bodysuit, is beautiful, chic and effortlessly poised in an abdominal-testing twist. Check out the elegant carriage of her shoulders, and those graceful legs. Her arresting, seen-everything eyes project gentle sympathy, as if to say, "I know you can't do this, but that's okay; I'll take it on. Just relax and enjoy."

It's no wonder [MGM has acquired the rights to DePrince's memoir](#), "Taking Flight," for a feature film. Her story of boundless tenacity and against-the-odds optimism swoops from one extreme to another. Her birth parents died in Sierra Leone's civil war. She grew up in a suburban family of 10 other kids, most adopted. At 14, she won a scholarship at the prestigious Youth America Grand Prix ballet competition, and she was one of the dancers spotlighted in "[First Position](#)," an engaging 2012 documentary about the contest.



[\[Read a story about another dancer featured in “First Position” whose fairytale dream came to an end.\]](#)

Now DePrince is a ballerina in Amsterdam’s Dutch National Ballet, one of Europe’s most interesting and forward-looking ballet companies.

“You don’t have to hold on to your past,” DePrince says in *Glamour*, sounding wise beyond her years. “If you can find a way to overcome the bad parts, great things can happen.”

But her ultimate goal? To open a school in Sierra Leone. For now, DePrince also works with the Girl Scouts and [War Child](#), helping kids recover from life in a war zone. Inspiration can come in great leaps—like becoming a black ballerina in a mostly white art form—or small steps, like spreading love. Says DePrince, “Sometimes you just need to make a little ripple to open the doors for others.”

Sarah Kaufman received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. She is the author of *THE ART OF GRACE: On Moving Well Through Life*, coming in Nov. 2015. She has been *The Washington Post's* dance critic since 1996, and after logging time in opera houses, black boxes, and dive bars, what moves her most is seeing grace happen where she least expects it.
