

Centennial "Welcome Home" Lecture to Feature Famed Dancer Alicia Graf Mack

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ST. LOUIS – She was the lead dancer of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, was once named an “American Innovator of the Arts and Sciences” by Smithsonian Magazine, received the Columbia University Medal of Excellence, and was called “radiant” by the New York Times.

Alicia Graf Mack is widely recognized as one of the most original dancers of our time. But while she has a creative ability to captivate audiences through dance while she is on stage, her off-stage life includes several career-ending injuries and a diagnosis with a genetic disease that causes extreme joint pain. It should have ended her career. Yet she has managed to fight her way back to the stage against all odds and persevere beyond all expectations.

Mack is the keynote speaker during “Welcome Home to the Future of Dance,” a Webster University event to celebrate its Centennial Year. The Sept. 25 event is co-sponsored by St. Louis Business Journal.

“As Webster celebrates our Centennial year, we welcome the inspiration, professional experience, and coaching that Alicia Graf Mack brings to prepare our students for high level professional careers in dance,” said Elizabeth (Beth) J. Stroble, Webster’s president. “With enthusiasm we invite members of the St. Louis community to join Webster and the St. Louis Business Journal in welcoming Alicia Graf Mack and making this her home.”

This year, Mack has started teaching dance at Webster University and Washington University, St. Louis.

“I was drawn to Webster because of its strong BFA program and its amazing dance studio,” Mack said. “It really is one of the most beautiful dance studios that I have ever worked in, and the students are incredibly talented.”

Mack has had a passion for dancing for as long as she can remember. She started dancing when she was “still in diapers” and joined the world-renowned Dance Theatre of Harlem in the middle of her senior year at Centennial High School in Ellicott City, Maryland. Soon she was a principal ballerina with that company and Complexions Contemporary Ballet before being named lead dancer for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

Other entries on her impressive resume include dancing as a guest performer with Alonzo King’s LINES Ballet; and for Beyoncé, John Legend, Andre 3000 and most recently, Alicia Keys on the 2013 “Set the World on Fire World Tour.” In addition, she’s appeared at many galas and festivals including the Youth America Grand Prix and

the International Stars of the 21st Century. She has made national television appearances as a featured guest on “Live with Kelly and Michael” and “The Tavis Smiley Show.” She also graduated magna cum laude with honors in History from Columbia University and holds an MA in Nonprofit Management from Washington University in St. Louis; wrote the cover story “Beyond Role Models” for Pointe Magazine’s June/July 2014 diversity issue featuring Ashley Murphy, Ebony Williams and Misty Copeland; and authored the foreword of American Dance: The Complete Illustrated History by Margaret Fuhrer.

It was in 1999 that her career took an unexpected turn. During a rehearsal with Dance Theatre of Harlem, she experienced pain and swelling in her knees. She sought medical attention and was cleared to return to practice. A few weeks later, it came back. Soon the pain became excruciating. An MRI revealed a cartilage tear in the knee, but extensive tests detected spondyloarthritis, a type of arthritis that causes intense pain in ligaments. She had to undergo knee surgery and then foot surgery to relieve the pain. It removed her from the dance floor for several years. Believing her arts career was over, she pursued her college education, worked in the world of finance and completed a master’s degree with the intention of working in the field of philanthropy to raise money for the arts. “I intended to stay active in the world of the arts, but dance called me back to perform,” Mack said. “Dance is where my passion lies and I couldn’t fight it.” So she battled back. She learned how to manage her spondyloarthritis through exercise and a strict diet. Soon she was back dancing full-time with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, receiving praises from major newspapers, magazines and dance critics.

She also formed D(n)A Arts Collective with her younger sister, Daisha Graf, a commercial dancer and singer who recently landed a contract with Sony Records. Their two brothers are business executives. Recently she and her husband relocated their family to St. Louis, where she has started teaching “I have been truly blessed as I have had so many great teachers, some of the best in the business,” Mack said. “I felt I had to start teaching, because to not share the knowledge that was shared with me seemed selfish.” Mack’s keynote presentation during the “Welcome Home to the Future of Dance, event is scheduled for 9:15 a.m. Sept. 25 in the Loretto-Hilton Center on Webster University’s home campus in Webster Groves. The event is free and open to the public.

To learn more about Webster University’s Centennial celebration, visit <http://100.webster.edu>.

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