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Workshop Gives Young Dancers a Taste of Broadway

Ask 15-year old Chelsea Aguilar what she wants to do when she grows up and she quickly answers, "My plans are to get a degree in musical theater and then go to Broadway. That's all I want."

A student at Monte Del Sol Charter School and serious dancer, actor and singer, Aguilar attended a two-week theater arts program at Hofstra University on New York's Long Island last summer and saw a few Broadway shows including "Chicago" and "Fiddler on the Roof" while she was near the Big Apple.

She would have considered participating in the Long Island-based program again this summer except she was busy dancing eight hours a day during a two-week session at a ballet school in Santa Barbara, California. It's a good thing that the National Dance Institute of New Mexico's Broadway Theater Dance Workshop fit into her busy schedule.

Aguilar's dream may be a little closer to reality because of the connections she's made at NDI's new theater arts program, which was put together by Tim Santos, the assistant director/ choreographer at Radio City Music Hall in New York. Broadway Theater Dance Workshop exposed 20 theater arts students from around the country, ages 14 through 20, to the wide variety of skills necessary to make it on Broadway. The two-week program began August 1 and finishes today, when students give a workshop performance at the NDI Barns that showcases what they learned. Santos brought a team of teachers- all veterans of Broadway- that included Michael Duran, the artistic director and producer at Boulder's Dinner Theater in Boulder, Colorado, who spent 23 years working on Broadway; Lesley Jennings, who worked on the faculty of Rosie O'Donnell's arts education program "Rosie's Broadway Kids" and appeared on Broadway in the Tommy Tune production of "Grease!"; Jim Ruttman, whose Broadway credits include "A Chorus Line," "Cats" and "Damn Yankees"; and noted New York tap teacher Germaine Salsberg. NDI's artistic director, Russell Baker, who has danced professionally with the Kansas City Ballet, taught ballet classes.

The students spent each morning in technique classes learning ballet, jazz, tap, theater dance, voice and drama. Afternoons were devoted to learning choreography and rehearsing for tonight's show. Sometimes students were required to stay at the Dance Barns after classes ended at 6 p.m. to watch a video of a Broadway musical or dance production and hear stories about what took place behind the scenes.

"You have to be a triple threat to make it on Broadway," says Santos. "You have to be able to dance, sing, and act just to be in the chorus. Opportunities to be in a chorus are greater than those for getting a lead role in a show. What we want students to realize is that it takes great skill to be a good ensemble player, and it's viable and attainable lifestyle."

Santos and his crew didn't just teach movements. They talked about the "ins" and "outs" of life on Broadway- helpful tips like how important it is to convey a character's personality the minute you show up for an audition and why a performer's union is so important to the professionals on Broadway.

"Of course, they can't learn everything they need to know in two weeks, but we can point them in a direction," Santos said.

Santos is already thinking about next summer's program and hopes to attract twice as many students.

"Theater is hard- it's not just a big party- but it's a blast," said Jennings. "The wonderful thing about this program is that the students got a taste of how wonderful life is in the theater. It's a great lifestyle."