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Ballet Hispánico's Gabrielle Sprauve Shares the Impact Teachers of Color Had on Her Training

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Ballet Hispánico dancer Gabrielle Sprauve understands firsthand the major impact teachers of color can have on a young black dancer's career. Over the course of her training, she had two teachers in particular who left a lifelong impression on her dancing. Here, she shares some of her experiences. James R. Atkinson

As a 12-year-old girl, Sprauve worked under the direction of James R. Atkinson (assistant professor at Alabama State University) at a studio then known as The Conservatory of Dance. Atkinson brought in a cast from all over the country and cast Sprauve as the first-ever African-American Clara in a Georgia Nutcracker.

"This made a big difference in my life," Sprauve says. "To have a teacher of color at the front of the room was a first for me then. He brought in an extremely diverse cast that included some of

the first black ballerinas I had ever encountered. I still consider him one of the most influential teachers I've ever had. He pushed me in ways I didn't know I was capable of. He would tell me I couldn't give up or be complacent, and that there was always more."

Dawn Axam

While attending the Georgia Governor's Honors Program (a residential summer program for gifted and talented high school students) after her sophomore year of high school, Sprauve trained under Dawn Axam, founder of Axam Dance Theatre Experience. In her class, Axam asked students to write in their journals and then use their entries as a pushing-off point for their dancing and choreography.

"She had us read one of our journal entries that we were OK with sharing out loud to the class, and then choreograph a solo to it," Sprauve says. "I wrote about my father having prostate cancer. It was a really hard time for me, and I started to cry when I read it, but all the dancers in the room were so supportive. She had me choreograph to it and perform it in the summer-program show. It was a really special experience for me that I still look back to. She was a woman of color who had done so much in her life and had all this information to share with me. It was helpful to have her pushing me to get to where I wanted to be. Even though I only worked with her for a short time, she molded me into the dancer I am today."

You can see Sprauve perform with Ballet Hispánico now through April 15 at The Joyce Theater in NYC.

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