University School Dance Educator Wins Prestigious Fellowship

University School instructor Toranika Washington was one of only eight dance educators to win a fellowship to the internationally-recognized Bates Dance Festival Professional Training Program. For three weeks prior to the start of school, Washington immersed herself in a program designed to renew high school dance educators’ passion for teaching and enhance their classroom and creative work. Bates’ faculty consists of world-renowned dance artists – teachers, performers and choreographers – and classes included technical skill development, creative process, instructional methods and health and wellness. Participants also attended performances and lectures, and created and critiqued new dance works.

Washington leads by example. Since starting Innovations Dance Theatre (IDT) during her first year at USchool, she has worked hard to expose students to "as much dance as I possibly can." Dance company members attend dance workshops, festivals and concerts in addition to performing in a variety of dance productions. She also established a National Honor Society for Dance Arts chapter to which IDT members can be inducted and earn awards based on their involvement.

A ballet and tap dancer by the age of four, Washington says she always knew that she was going to do something in the dance world. She added jazz and modern dance to her repertoire and later founded the Bailadora Dance Ensemble while in college, a move that allowed her to hone her choreographic skills.

"Ultimately, I found that my heart is in teaching dance," Washington said. "I think the gratification is in the transformation. Students come to me with all kinds of issues... but they all change when they walk out of the studio. As time goes on they tend to walk upright with grace; it's as if the self-esteem switch has been turned on. They feel good about themselves because they are trying innovative techniques that they never knew were possible.

The family-oriented culture and incredible support for the arts makes teaching at University School enjoyable, Washington added, and the caliber of students makes it easy for her to introduce choreographic challenges.

"[USchool students] are aware of what's happening in the world and they have strong opinions about ways to make it better. With that kind of insight... they are open enough to try most anything," Washington said. "I like to witness students’ ‘a ha’ moments. The actual moment the movement clicks is a pretty special event."

In less than two weeks, Ms. Washington will host auditions for the 2011-2012 IDT dance company. Every year brings about a new group of talent as well as an opportunity to see how returning dancers progressed over the break. Her advice to students auditioning: "Look at this experience as a dance class, not an audition. Keep smiling and no matter what, take something positive away from your time in the studio."