



Legislation Text

File #: Res 0741-2025, **Version:** *

Res. No. 741

Resolution designating May 10 annually as Judith Jamison Day in the City of New York to honor her life and legacy as a dancer, choreographer, and longtime artistic director of the groundbreaking Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

By Council Members Rivera, Williams, Brewer, Louis, Banks, Dinowitz, Hudson, Cabán, Gutiérrez, Brooks-Powers and Mealy

Whereas, Judith Ann Jamison was born in Philadelphia on May 10, 1943, to Tessie Bell Brown Jamison, an elementary school drama teacher, and John Henry Jamison, a sheet metal engineer with a love for classical piano, and raised with her brother in the Germantown section of Philadelphia, where her parents instilled a love for the arts in Jamison; and

Whereas, Jamison began ballet lessons at the age of 6 at the Judimar School of Dance, one of the studios where Black students could get classical training, and took classes in ballet and other dance genres straight through until she was 17; and

Whereas, Jamison left for Nashville to attend Fisk University, a well-known HBCU, but returned to Philadelphia after three semesters to pursue studies for a dance career at the Philadelphia Dance Academy; and

Whereas, Jamison left for New York City (NYC) to pursue a professional dance career and, in 1964, after dancing in an Agnes de Mille piece for the American Ballet Theater, Jamison's audition for a television special caught dancer-choreographer-artistic director Alvin Ailey's eye; and

Whereas, Ailey invited this unusually tall, strong, classically trained, newly professional dancer to join his pioneering modern dance company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, which he had founded with a small group of dedicated dancers in 1958 to showcase the beauty and talent of Black dancers; and

Whereas, Jamison soon became Ailey’s muse for many of his pieces and danced with the Ailey company for 15 years, as it toured the world and brought to the stage all of the now-classic Ailey works; and

Whereas, One of Jamison’s most famous roles was as the towering, fluid, graceful umbrella-carrying dancer in a baptism scene at a river, set to the traditional spiritual “Wade in the Water” from *Revelations*, Ailey’s masterpiece memorializing his “blood memories” of life growing up in Rogers, Texas; and

Whereas, In 1971, Ailey choreographed what would become Jamison’s signature role and would earn her standing ovations worldwide, the much acclaimed *Cry*, a 16-minute physically and emotionally draining solo tribute to, in Ailey’s words, “all Black women everywhere, especially our mothers”; and

Whereas, Speaking at Jamison’s Celebration of Life on December 11, 2024, former Ailey star Donna Wood Sanders explained how Jamison had taught *Cry* to her and to every other dancer who performed it, noting that Jamison was usually in the wings when Sanders performed it to provide encouragement as a “mentoring and guiding spirit,” especially needed for the strenuous final section “Right On, Be Free”; and

Whereas, In 1976, Ailey choreographed *Pas de Duke* to Duke Ellington music as a duet for Jamison and Russian ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1976, after his defection from the Soviet Union, which showcased their stylistic differences as well as their equally extraordinary technical and interpretive skills; and

Whereas, Jamison left the Ailey company in 1980 to star in 1981’s *Sophisticated Ladies*, a Broadway revue showcasing Duke Ellington’s music; and

Whereas, Jamison began her own choreographic career in 1984 with *Diving* for the Ailey company and later added many more pieces to her choreographic portfolio, including *A Hymn for Alvin Ailey* (1993) and *Love Stories* (2004); and

Whereas, In 1988, Jamison started her own troupe, the Jamison Project, but returned to the Ailey company the following year when Ailey died at the age of 58 and she assumed his role as artistic director of the company, a job she would have for 21 consequential years; and

Whereas, As artistic director, Jamison kept in the repertoire the signature classic pieces choreographed

by Ailey himself, staged her own choreography, and brought in works by a variety of choreographers of various styles, including other notable Black choreographers like Ronald K. Brown (*Grace* in 1999); and

Whereas, Jamison brought the Ailey company out of debt, grew its budget, and helped make the company even more famous and more celebrated during its national and international tours; and

Whereas, In 1992, Jamison was inducted as an honorary member into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, a private, not-for-profit Black Greek-Letter Organization of college-educated women committed to sisterhood, scholarship, service, and social action; and

Whereas, Jamison's *Dancing Spirit* autobiography, edited by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, was published in 1993; and

Whereas, In 1999, Jamison became a recipient of the prestigious Kennedy Center Honors; and

Whereas, Jamison has also received numerous other honors, including a Primetime Emmy Award for outstanding choreography in 1999, the National Medal of Arts in 2001, the Bessie Award in 2007, and The NYC Handel Medallion, NYC's highest intellectual and cultural honor, in 2010; and

Whereas, The Joan Weill Center for Dance, named for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's longtime supporter and Board chair emerita and opened after enormous fundraising work by Jamison in 2005, is a beautifully appointed modern building with its own theater, six floors of medium and large studios, and offices at West 55th Street and Ninth Avenue, the most impressive home in the history of the company and The Ailey School, with its many classes for students of all ages; and

Whereas, Still a commanding and beloved presence as artistic director emerita of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Jamison died in Manhattan on November 9, 2024, after a brief illness at the age of 81; and

Whereas, Speaking at Jamison's Celebration of Life, Sylvia Waters, former Ailey star and artistic director emerita of Ailey II (the second company of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater), explained that Jamison was noted for her "elegance and eloquence" and had indeed "[taken] dance to the people" across the

U.S. and around the world, just as Ailey himself had famously always championed; and

Whereas, Jamison herself is quoted in the Celebration of Life program about the nature of dance, saying that “[t]hrough dance, we’re as close to God as we’re going to get-until he calls us home”; and

Whereas, The designation of a day is fitting to commemorate the life and legacy of Judith Jamison, whose commitment to dance changed the dance world forever-both for dancers on the stage and spectators in the audience-in NYC and beyond; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York designates May 10 annually as Judith Jamison Day in the City of New York to honor her life and legacy as a dancer, choreographer, and longtime artistic director of the groundbreaking Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

LS #18323 and 18651
2/6/2025
RHP