

# Camden troupe can go international - but it needs a money miracle



By Annette John-Hall

Inquirer Columnist

This can't be it - can it?

This tiny, run-down storefront on Mount Ephraim Avenue can't be the Unity Community Center of South Jersey Inc., the place that has produced the acclaimed Universal African Dance and Drum Ensemble, hailed as one of the best performing-arts organizations in the entire nation.

Yes, I said *nation*.

You have to see these young people perform to truly appreciate them. On stage, they're energy personified - a dozen or more girls, a few as young as 2, clad in traditional West African clothing, performing leaping, kinetic choreography, fueled by a cadre of nonstop drummers. There's even a stilt walker.

The troupe is an in-demand mainstay, having performed at the Kimmel Center and venues up and down the East Coast.

But now it's headed international - if it can work a last-minute miracle.

The ensemble has been selected to perform at the prestigious World Festival of Black Arts and Cultures in Dakar, Senegal. About \$35,000 is needed to send the entire troupe to the festival, which opens Dec. 10.

Yep, that's Friday of *next* week.

But husband-and-wife founders Robert and Wanda Dickerson have gotten good at keeping hope alive.

Because in Camden, sometimes all you have is hope.

I was shocked seeing the dilapidated conditions that the kids have to rehearse in. But not surprised. This, after all, is financially insolvent, politically dysfunctional Camden.

Where officials think it's perfectly plausible to consider slashing half of the police force in a city cited as the second most dangerous in the United States.



You would think that in a city where more than 40 percent of the population consists of children younger than 18, the dance ensemble would be not only prized but also prioritized for the youth ambassadors for Camden.

You would think.

Instead, it's a miracle that the Dickersons have been able to keep the community center running on minimal support and a whole lot of prayer for 27 years.

They fund-raised for the last year, collecting enough to send 12 of their members to Senegal, says Robert. He hopes to send 35 more. "I want all of our young people to see the beauty of Africa."

Pointing to the 37 homicides this year in a city of only 80,000, he adds: "The reason why so much killing is going on is because these people have no love and respect for each other. Through arts and culture, we can teach them the value of love and respect."

Which has always been the mission since Robert, 56, and Wanda, 54, opened the community center in 1983. Both black belts in karate, the Dickersons initially taught only martial arts there.

But dance and drumming eventually took front and center, literally. The martial-arts studio (if you can call it that) is now in the back of the storefront. A tiny patch of dance space extends worn greetings up front.

They have their sights set on moving into a privately donated, 6,000-square-foot former auto-body shop on Haddon Avenue.

Four years ago, the couple submitted a \$1 million grant application to the \$175 million Camden recovery fund to renovate the building. The goodwill and the good works the Dickersons invested for more than two decades resulted in zilch from the city.

"Camden is a city that thinks so small," says Robert, a Philadelphia native who has lived in Camden 35 years. "They're not used to anything taking national acclaim. That's been our struggle here."

Whether everyone gets to Senegal or not, Robert and Wanda vow to keep their doors open as a safe haven for the children and to not shortchange any of them.

By instilling a love for culture - whether it's in a world-renowned festival in Africa or a tiny storefront in Camden.

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To make a donation for the Universal African Dance and Drum Ensemble's trip to Senegal, contact Robert Dickerson at 856-365-4817 or [Uccupk@aol.com](mailto:Uccupk@aol.com).