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Kids Create Original Performance in African Drum, Dance Class At Miami Summer Camp

By [JESSICA BAKEMAN \(/PEOPLE/JESSICA-BAKEMAN\)](/PEOPLE/JESSICA-BAKEMAN) • 23 HOURS AGO

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Renee Chavez, center, leads her students in an Afro-Cuban rumba beat. The class is part of a summer camp run by Concerned African Women at Miami Park Elementary School in West Little River, a neighborhood in northwest Miami.

JESSICA BAKEMAN / WLRN NEWS

Half of the percussion section is lined up along a classroom wall, with whiteboards to their backs. Each young boy is shaking a *shekere* – a West African instrument made from a dried gourd and covered with a colorful beaded netting.

The rest of the musicians are sitting nearby in blue plastic chairs with *djun djun* and *djembe* drums at their feet. They bang on the instruments with one or two wooden sticks – or just their hands.



They're laying down the beat for the girls, who are jumping and moving their bodies like waves to the music.



Listen

1:21

Listen here to the sounds of the Concerned African Women summer camp's drum and dance class.

This group is part of the 300 kids – all sporting bright purple T-shirts – that are participating in this year's summer camp run by the group Concerned African Women at Miami Park Elementary School in West Little River. For many of the elementary school-age campers, the highlights are the African drumming and dance classes.

They're playing Afro-Cuban rumba music, performing the West African dances kuku and Manjani and learning to sing "Funga Alafia," a Nigerian welcome song.

“When you dance, it’s not all about ... who’s the best. It’s all about exercise,” said Semaj Hall, 9, an incoming fourth-grader at Miami Park Elementary. “And drumming is a good way to make music and to also exercise your hands a little bit.”

There’s no tuition for the eight-week camp, although parents have to pay for weekly field trips. Most of the costs are covered by the nonprofit The Children’s Trust, which provided \$54 million in grants to after-school programs and summer camps in Miami-Dade County this year.

The Concerned African Women camp has received funding from The Children’s Trust since 2004. The group runs a separate camp for middle and high schoolers at Miami Dade College’s North Campus, where juniors and seniors in high school are able to earn college credits.

At the camp for the younger kids, students are creating their own original music and dance pieces for their end-of-summer showcase, which will take place on July 31 and will be free and open to the public. The location is yet to be announced.

Renee Chavez, one of the camp’s two drum instructors, said she and the other teachers give students the basics of music and dance with a variety of different African origins and influences and hope it sparks their creativity.

“We want them to be inspired by it and to find their own core,” she said.

One of the dance teachers, Patricia Carby, fuses movement and poetry in her classes.

Earlier this week, she wrote a stanza of the poem “Hey, Black Child” by Countee Cullen on the whiteboard and asked for volunteers to read it aloud. One girl waved her hand wildly and said, “I can read every book in the library!”

While some kids took turns reading, Carby directed others to do splits, flex their muscles and strike other poses demonstrating their strength. The musicians played drums and chimes.

After, the group yelled the poem together: “Hey, black child, do you know you are strong? I mean really strong? Do you know you can do what you want to do, if you try to do what you can do?”



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Teacher Patricia Carby asks her students to choose a pose that demonstrates strength, like flexing their arms, during her dance class.

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