



# One-Time War Orphan Michaela DePrince Stars as Dancer with Dutch National Ballet Company

Leah Jessen / August 21, 2015

Roughly 15 years ago, staff at an orphanage in war-torn Sierra Leone “ranked” the children in their care.

Their favorite child, number one, received special treatment including first pick of clothing donations and larger meal portions. Number 27 was starved and referred to as “the devil’s child.”

Michaela DePrince, now 20 years old and a star dancer with the Dutch National Ballet company, was number 27.

DePrince, orphaned at age three after rebels killed her father and her mother died of starvation, was abused because of a skin condition called vitiligo. The disease causes skin discoloration or spotting, and was not understood in the small West African village in which she was born. She had only one friend, orphan number 26.

DePrince’s one salvation in those early years came in the form of a dream she discovered by accident, stumbling upon a magazine that had blown through the gate of the orphanage. Just a small child, she saw a picture of a “fairy-like creature,” a white ballerina costumed in a pink tutu.

“When I saw the joy in her face, I was determined to be happy too,” DePrince says. “At that point in my life, I decided to be exactly like that lady some day.”

*Hi everyone, the posters are finally here. They will be available on Amazon in two weeks!!!! #Finally #michaeladeprince #takingflight #jadeypoto*

*Posted by Michaela DePrince on Sunday, July 26, 2015*

DePrince ripped the page out of the magazine and tucked it into her underwear, having nowhere else to store it.

A teacher, the one woman at the orphanage that showed DePrince compassion, explained the image was a picture of a ballerina. DePrince began practicing dancing on her toes and twirling at the orphanage.

Tragedy struck again when DePrince later witnessed the murder of that very teacher. Rebels cut open the pregnant woman's stomach while a young rebel attempted the same on DePrince's stomach with a machete.

Traumatized, DePrince survived the attack, the photograph of the ballerina her only remaining source of hope.

Across the world, the American DePrince family faced their own tragedy, losing three adopted sons with hemophilia to AIDS.

The DePrinces flew to Africa to adopt again, and found four-year-old Michaela and her best friend, orphan number 26, now called Mia. The family adopted both girls.

"Despite all the hardship and pain that Michaela had endured, she was the spunkiest, and feistiest, though tiniest four year old that I had ever met. She was a very bright and very strong girl," Michaela's mother Elaine DePrince says.

In total, the DePrince family has adopted a total of six orphaned girls in Liberia and Sierra Leone, all victims of raging civil wars. They encouraged all of their children to pursue their passions with equal vigor.

"It has been a fascinating experience to watch Michaela go from the bedraggled, tough little girl that she was to a beautiful and gracious young woman who is so interested in helping others," Elaine DePrince says.

*Happy Mother's Day to the best mom in the world! I love you with all my heart! I miss you so much and I can't wait to see you this summer! ????*

*Posted by Michaela DePrince on Sunday, May 10, 2015*

With the support from her parents, Michaela perfected her technique, simultaneously overcoming race and beauty-based stereotypes often associated with ballet.

“It takes a lot of sacrifice to enable your children to do this,” Elaine DePrince says. “We chose the girls over cruises and fancy restaurants.”

The sacrifices paid off. DePrince won a full scholarship to the American Ballet Theatre in the 2010 Youth American Grand Prix. In 2011, she gained national attention after being profiled in the documentary *First Position*, a film about dancers.

Then, in 2012 at age 17, she became the youngest dancer at the Dance Theatre of Harlem in New York City.

“What I love most about ballet is being able to express my emotions through dance, and to be able to bring others joy through my art,” DePrince says.

Today, along with her position at the Amsterdam-based Dutch National Ballet, DePrince has taught classes at schools in Brooklyn and in South Africa. Recently, she spent time as a volunteer guest teacher in several Southern dance schools in underserved communities.

Elaine and Michaela DePrince have also co-authored a book, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*.

“I hope to inspire other young people who have faced adversity, so that they can find a meaning to their lives,” DePrince says. “When I talk to groups of young people, I try to advise them to search for a dream and reach for it.”

As for her dreams, DePrince hopes to one day launch free dance schools in Sierra Leone and the United States for young girls living in poverty.

“Being adopted by the DePrince family has brought me everything I have in life,” she says, conscious of how her life could have turned out in Sierra Leone if not for the DePrinces. “It has given me love, hope, and the opportunities to make my dreams come true. From them, I also learned about courage, compassion, and sacrifice.”

But perhaps the greatest lesson DePrince has taken away from her 20 years on earth traces back to those days in West Africa.

“There is no way that anyone could experience a war and witness all the horror that it brings without gaining a greater respect for life and its possibilities.”

