Camden troupe looks for a miracle

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 See TRouPE on B11

See TRouPE next page
Karima Dickerson (center left), 10, rehearses with the rest of the Universal African Dance and Drum Ensemble. The Camden troupe has been invited to perform in Senegal, and needs about $35,000 to make the trip.

Commentary By Annette John-Hall

Camden troupe needs a miracle

TROUPE from B1 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.

Yes, 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.

While officials claim 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.”

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.

Contact me at 215-854-4986 or ajohnhall@phillynews.com. Follow me on Twitter @Annette.jh.

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.