

Pass It On®...

Listening to the Music Inside.

The long journey of Maria Tallchief from the Osage Nation in Oklahoma to prima ballerina in New York City.

Fairfax, Oklahoma, is a long way from the bright lights of Broadway. In 1925, the distance seemed even greater. But Maria Tallchief could feel music deep inside her. Something longed to express itself.

At a very young age, Maria studied music and dance, encouraged by her mother to find herself in the motions she loved. In her early teens, she and her family moved to Los Angeles in search of opportunities. Maria pursued all forms of dance but was drawn specifically to ballet. She worked relentlessly under the most renowned teachers of the day, but the opportunity she longed for would not arrive until she moved to New York City.

The big city can be daunting for a teenager, especially a dancer auditioning daily while keeping up with training. Still, Maria's success began to build. As she traveled the globe dancing at various theaters, she became a household name — a name she refused to change when some suggested that her American Indian heritage might be standing in the way of her success.

At age 19, Maria Tallchief became a member of the New York City Ballet and later one of its principal dancers. She brought her role to life in "The Nutcracker" and helped make it the amazing success that it is today.

"Above all, I wanted to be appreciated as a prima ballerina who happened to be a Native American, never as someone who was an American Indian ballerina," she said.

Maria Tallchief had accomplished her dreams at a very young age dancing for the New York City Ballet, but there was more. She became the first-ever prima ballerina from the United States at a time when that honor belonged mostly to European dancers. And she did it without ever giving up on her heritage. She retained her Osage name, proud of who she was and where she'd come from. She never stopped listening to the music inside her,

remarking, "A ballerina takes steps given to her and makes them her own." Indeed she did.

Later in life, Maria Tallchief taught hundreds of young girls to follow their dreams. Her work was inspired in part by her belief that "very often you are in the right place, at the right time, but you don't know it."

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