When the eight Hartt School dance students in Hilda Morales’s Level 3 Variations class look back on their college careers, Nov. 3, 2014, is certain to be among the highlights.

On that day, the students participated in a master class with high-profile ballet star Misty Copeland, an inspiration to countless young girls and others for overcoming numerous obstacles to become the first African American soloist in the American Ballet Theatre in two decades.

Copeland, who was brought to the University of Hartford’s Hartt School by Dance Division Director Stephen Pier, received an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts in a brief ceremony after the master class. President Walter Harrison, Provost Sharon Vasquez, and regent Rosy Kapur presented Copeland with an honorary degree, eliciting giggles from her as Vasquez placed a doctoral hood and robe over her black workout clothes.

The accomplished honoree took her first ballet class at age 13—considered an advanced age to begin studying ballet—on a basketball court at her local Boys and Girls Club. Her meteoric rise since then defies the traditional background, image, and body type for a ballerina, and Copeland has become an outspoken advocate for opening ballet to others who may not fit the mold.

Copeland said that teaching “is probably one of my favorite things to do,” and it showed. She worked with the eight juniors and seniors in groups of two, praising and encouraging them as she gave pointers on everything from arm movements and foot position to making eye contact with the audience. Copeland demonstrated the techniques with seemingly effortless grace and athleticism, as she glided across the floor of the Roberts Theater in the Handel Performing Arts Center.

But the famous ballerina was clearly moved by the honorary degree presentation. “I never, ever dreamed something like this would happen,” she said of receiving an honorary doctorate. “I’m honored to be here and I’m honored to be a dancer.”

When asked about her long-term goals, Copeland, 32, said she would like to be a principal dancer some day, and she wants to continue to learn and to challenge herself every day.

One student asked her if she had ever wanted to quit. Copeland quickly responded, “Yes.”

After years of being the only black woman among the 80 dancers in the American Ballet Theatre, “there was just a time of feeling really alone and isolated and not sure if I belonged in the ballet world,” Copeland said. “I think it’s important to accept help and guidance in those moments.”

Several of the students who participated in the master class said that Copeland’s down-to-earth manner and warm personality immediately made them feel comfortable.

“As soon as she walked in, you could tell she was excited to work with us,” said master-class participant Elizabeth Angleson ’15. “It put me right at ease.”

But it wasn’t just the students in the master class who were thrilled by Copeland’s visit. Many other Hartt dance students asked questions during the Q&A session and lined up afterwards to talk to Copeland and have her sign copies of her book, Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina.

Freshman dance students Alexia Maitland, Samiyah Parramore, and Nacoleon Hillsman—all of whom are African American and started ballet at a late age—said that Copeland has been an idol of theirs for a long time.

“To see someone our own color on stage,” Hillsman said, “it’s just so amazing that she’s here.”

Top: Misty Copeland (left), acclaimed American Ballet Theatre ballerina, demonstrates proper arm position to a student in the Level 3 Variations class at The Hartt School.
Bottom left: A warm and enthusiastic Copeland introduces herself to dance students in the Hartt master class.
Bottom right: (L–R) President Walter Harrison, University regent Rosy Kapur, and Provost Sharon L. Vasquez present an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts to Copeland following the master class.