

Into the Spotlight

By Carmela Basegio

I blink against the harsh gold lights shining onto my face. A chill spreads over my arms in the cool wings of the stage. There are only a few moments before I must step onstage to perform for the very first time. My eyes dart over the dozens of pale purple leotards and slick buns of the dancers currently onstage, scanning for my cue to waltz forward. At last, I take a deep breath, remind myself to smile, and step into the spotlight.

Starting ballet at 13, I have often been haunted by the feeling of being behind. Most people start dancing when they are first able to walk as toddlers and essentially grow up in a studio, surrounded by the same people for their entire childhood. However, the extracurricular activity of my youth was karate. I began shortly after turning six, and devoted over seven years to it. However, the idea of dancing ballet always hovered in the back of my mind. The grace, flexibility, and precision of the dancers intrigued me, though I held back from joining for years, fearing that it was far too late for me to start.

In the 8th grade, I finally overcame this anxiety, and with a friend, began taking ballet classes that were specifically for teens who were looking to start learning ballet. Eventually, I advanced enough to join the primary ballet program of the school— which featured the matching black leotards, pink tights, and smooth buns— the pinnacle of portrayals of ballet in the movies. However, as a result, I ended up in a class full of people who are years younger than I am and still twice as flexible and balanced.

Starting ballet late definitely served to keep my ego in check, as I was never anywhere near the most skilled in the room. It was a challenge for a lifelong perfectionist like me to learn to accept that starting something new also means I will not be very good, at least in the beginning. Impostor Syndrome had also plagued me over the years of learning ballet. I never felt that I could share my hobby because I wasn't a "real" ballerina, as I can't do all of the impressive leaps and turns that people usually picture when someone mentions ballet.

However, this past year, I experienced a turning point in my journey through my very first ballet performance. Every year, my ballet school puts on a spring showcase that includes routines choreographed by the most senior students as well as group numbers for the more advanced classes. It was the first time I would ever be performing in front of an audience since I was in the school play in Kindergarten! I thought that I would be brimming with nerves, especially having grown up a very shy kid, but all I felt was excitement. We rehearsed the piece in every ballet class for months leading up to the performance, so I felt prepared. This, in combination with my workload at school kept me so busy that I had hardly any time to even feel nervous!

Although for many of the other people in my class, this was just another show, similar to the numerous performances they had done previously, this was a major step forward for me. Almost four years ago, I didn't think this was even possible.

I will never forget the feeling of being in full costume and makeup for the first time before the show. Being in the sea of lavender costumes in the greenroom full of my classmates made me feel more like a true ballet dancer and part of the group than I ever had before.

There were two performances on the evening of the spring showcase, with an hour or so spent in the greenroom before each. During this time, I got to know a lot more of the other girls in my class in a way that I never had been able to during the stricter environment of classes. I feel that actually being a part of a show was a rite of passage for me, cementing me as a serious dancer and committed part of the community in the school.

Since the spring show in May, I've spent much of my summer at the ballet studio. From doing four more performances in June and helping out with the younger kids to taking a summer intensive that pushed me to improve both my endurance and techniques, I've felt more fulfilled and immersed in ballet than I ever have before.

Despite this, there is a lingering feeling of bittersweetness. With the school year and girls' tennis season approaching, I know I will have to miss many of my ballet classes in the fall. But perhaps more important is the looming reality of attending college in my future. As a rising senior, I know that my time in both high school and at my ballet studio is now very limited and diminishing every day. It pains me to think that just as I have begun to feel really accepted and included in the world of ballet I will likely have to leave as I go wherever my journey in college takes me. This is perhaps the greatest cost of starting so late in my eyes. When I look around at the other girls in my class, many of them a few years younger than me, I am envious of all of the time they still have to go to the ballet school daily. To spend with their friends without school and work getting in the way. I hope that they make the best of it.

Although I know that college will most likely pull me away from home and from ballet, I still hold an ember of hope that I will be able to continue pursuing dance after I graduate from high school in any way that I can. Ballet has truly become one of the great passions of my life. Over the past year especially, it has filled me with motivation, pride, and a sense of fulfillment that nothing else has in my life.

Even though my time left with this period of my life is short, I still strive to relish every moment of it. And after I have moved on to the next chapter, I can still hold on to the lifelong memories I have made this year— the long hours, the friendships, and the greater passion for ballet I discovered. These memories will stay with me forever. They are proof of how far I have come from the shy little girl who didn't feel confident enough to give her dreams a chance. I am a ballet dancer.