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Main Story

On a dreary Monday morning, a group of young dancers stretch in a spacious lobby of the Jimmie Defore Dance Center in Costa Mesa. Patiently they await the signal to enter a dimly lit studio where they are greeted by a row of professional instructors. The dancers proceed to the barre as a lengthy middle-aged man demonstrates an exercise in less than a minute. He speaks with a French accent. A familiar classical piano ballad emerges through the speakers as the dancers stand with blank faces, perfect posture, and legs turned out. The audition begins.

45 minutes later, the gears switch. The dancers scurry to the corner to change their shoes while a petite, yet fairly muscular woman waits in the corner. She mumbles French terms in a verbal choreographed sequence and demonstrates once. The speaker wails a percussive tune of which battements, pirouettes, and jetes fill in the tiny fragment of an 8-count. This was just the beginning. In a matter of days, all of this will eventually become a routine.

Each year, the Jimmie Defore Dance Center attracts dancers of all levels and experience to their facility with their talented staff of professional instructors and dancers. Because of the high success rate of their clients, the studio has been awarded as the Best Dance Studio in Orange County. It has become the home to local dance

companies such as Jazz Spectrum, Bare Dance Company, and the MVP Dance Project. More importantly, it is the home to their one-of-a-kind scholarship program.

The Defore scholarship program aims to assist aspiring dancers to pursue a professional career in dance. Students from the past have made a living with what they have learned from the program. Many have signed with top agencies and have traveled abroad to work for cruise lines, theatre, and professional companies. Others have also found a passion for teaching. Every year, the program continues to draw more and more dancers.

Some dancers even traveled from out of state for this opportunity. Chadwick Waite, a break-dancer, is 23 years-old and moved from Louisville, KY. He has been on scholarship since September 2008. Another is Leisel Stohr, 27. She heard good things about the program from a past student and made the move all the way from Portland, OR to join the program in September.

In 1980, it simply started as a work-study program to assist talented dancers who struggled to pay for dance classes. However, it officially became a scholarship program in 1987. By 1997, Christine Baltes, a professional dancer in her day and a master teacher for many dancers in the industry, took on as artistic director making it the program that is known to us now.

“The program prior to me had no direction as to what classes the student should be taking,” said Baltes. “There was no real contact with a program director.”

As a result, Baltes has become known for establishing strong and lasting relationships with her students. She works closely with each dancer in order to design a

class schedule that is fitting for both the dancer's technical level and their overall career goal.

"I care about the students who walk into my classes and I make a commitment to each one," said Baltes.

Individual attention is not the only benefit of being a scholarship dancer. The students' schedules range from 15 to 20 classes per week in a variety of styles such as ballet, hip hop, jazz, modern, and tap. Considering a single class costs \$14 at Defore's, the scholarship program is a gold mine for those who have burned a hole in their wallets. But don't think that you can get on this boat just for the financial benefit. All scholarship dancers are required to pay their dues and their respects to the studio by helping out at the studio as much as possible. Each student is required to work one shift a week where they are expected to manage administrative and cleaning duties.

"We're the reason why dancers aren't rolling in dust during class," said Cayleen Ong, a scholarship dancer since March 2008.

It is not just anybody who could be eligible for acceptance to the program. Although though the levels of each dancer may vary, Baltes' only chooses the most driven and the most patient dancers out there.

"Some dancers just want to improve so quickly," said Baltes. "Patience is what brings it all together. When people say 'it didn't happen overnight', they mean it."

Cayleen Ong has been on scholarship since March 2008. She is a music major at Orange Coast College with dreams to pursue a career in musical theater.

“You dance three to four hours a day hoping you will improve in a couple weeks,” said Ong. “I learned that it doesn’t work that way. It’s tough. You have to experience the pain to experience the joy.”

As a director, Baltes deals with a lot of the dancers’ frustrations. But she seems to be pretty good at it. With such a heavy load, dancers are bound to burn out, especially during the “Pulse” term. Pulse is a professional dance concert that has become an annual event since 1998. It is an opportunity for the scholarship dancers to showcase their talent. Local dance companies and additional choreographers are invited to submit pieces to supplement the show.

Each year starting in September, scholarship students start their fall term with a typical schedule. However, rehearsals are added to that schedule as early as October. All dancers perform up six pieces by a variety of well-known choreographers such as Michael Van Patten and Mike Esperanza. Because studio space is often occupied during mornings and nights, rehearsals are typically held before and after studio hours. And yes, all scholarship dancers are required to attend dance classes in addition to rehearsal hours. Talk about hard work.

“You pretty much don’t have much of a life outside of the studio,” said Ong.

“You eat, breathe, and sleep dance.”

What makes the fall term so much more beneficial is the fact that the dancers get the full experience of working in a professional environment. The term includes a photo-shoot for headshots so that dancers can attack the dance industry after their engagement. Being able to perform onstage also gives the students the opportunity to learn about the

stage, lighting, performance quality, backstage etiquette, and all the work that a professional show entails.

Many dancers who have been on scholarship have expressed how much they have benefited from the experience. For dancers like Waite, who is a newbie to the dance world, he claims that dancing on scholarship and being able to perform onstage as unforgettable.

“I couldn’t do any ballet technique before,” said Waite. “But now I can do multiple pirouettes, my feet stay pointed, my arms look better, and I can pick up choreography. I am more confident now.”

It seems that Baltes has lived and breathed for each one of her students. She has managed to mold ordinary people into beautiful dancers allowing them to succeed in life with their passion. Even when the road to success becomes rocky, she has encouraged her dancers to enjoy the ride.

“Life is a process of living. You must enjoy that process. Believe in yourself & be patient,” said Baltes.

Auditions take place three times a year and roughly 10 to 15 dancers are accepted each term. Dancers are evaluated based on a ballet barre, technical jazz exercises, and a combination by the program directors and a staff of professional instructors. Log onto <http://www.deforedance.com> for more info.

