

The dignity of work-to-study agreements in private studios

How do you follow your dreams when it costs so much to pursue a passion for dance? Equal access should be a priority for the dance world.

by Nashalah McNamara

“Darling, we love you, and we want to support your passion, but we just can’t afford your dance classes anymore,” my parents gently told me as a ten-year-old, deeply spinning with my new passion for dance. They told me we would figure something out, but my heart softly sank into my chest. I didn’t want to crumble, but I did, just a little.

The next day I arrived at my tiny hometown’s local studio, and meekly approached the owner of the studio who had, over the years, become like a second mother to me. “I can’t take classes anymore,” I said, my eyes dropping to the floor. “My parents can’t afford it.”

“Sweetheart, you’re not going anywhere—you have so much passion, and I see so much potential in you,” she said without a second thought, wrapping me up in her arms. “You can help me out, and continue taking classes.”

If it weren’t for this woman, my dancing would have more than likely never left my living room. My parents would do anything for me. They always found a way to make my dreams a reality, but I felt the hopelessness in their chests during this time, and watched the light return when my studio’s owner gave us possibility.

I had a moment of believing that money was about to crush my dreams, and for a lot of kids, that is the crippling reality. That’s where it stops, when a passion for dance is

opposed by socioeconomic status. I like to believe I just got lucky, but what if I didn’t? Would the love affair I had just begun with dance end in the honeymoon phase because of something out of my control?

I always like to think that most studio owners would be willing to work something out for low-income kids whether it’s a work trade like I did, or some other agreement, but the reality is, some might not be able to offer that, and some families might never ask for the help. So how can you get help without asking for it?

All studios, programs, and conservatories should be openly offering these options without families having to ask for it. It might be crazy, but it’s 2020 and we’ve been pushing for equal access for a long time- we might as well run with it. Kids deserve to be kids and to have big dreams that don’t stop at a dollar sign.

For me, growing up getting to work for what I love was empowering and ultimately led me to a greater work ethic. My attitude was that “I worked to be here, so I want to be here,” which wasn’t quite in line with most of my peers. Their parents threw cash at our studio, and had their kids in as many classes as possible just so they’d get a break for a glass of wine. Did their kids want to be there as much as I did? I grew up in wealthy areas, in a low-income family, and that was a reality I just learned to exist in because that’s all I could do.

Dance can be a money-sucking machine. Families will end up paying hundreds or thousands of dollars a year between classes, costumes, registration fees—the list goes on. I knew just how much these parents were putting into their children’s dance experience because working behind the desk was often part of my work trade agreement.

Seeing all the numbers got me thinking about free after-school programs, nonprofits, and volunteering. There never seems to be a shortage of high school kids trying to get volunteer hours to list on their ivy league college applications here in Orange County. Yes, there are lots of programs that offer dance in place already, but they are often recreational, simply for the sake of having fun. What about the kids who want to start training seriously at a young age, but can’t afford a fancy studio? There is a plethora of qualified, highly trained teachers who could be using their experience to train these kids in low-income areas.

Implementing, and normalizing work study programs in studios and conservatories feels very necessary at this point in order to minimize embarrassment for children who are already in a vulnerable position. I remember having to avoid conversations about costume fees, and “have you paid for

this month’s tuition yet? What’s the due date again?” I always knew the due date because I was the one behind the desk collecting checks. I always felt like I was hiding the fact that I was working for my training. Why was this something to be embarrassed about? The fact that I was working twice as hard, and spending double the amount of time at the studio just so I could train more should have been admirable, but it never felt that way.

I always felt like the black sheep, in a room full of privilege. My peers had this nose-to-the ceiling entitlement that made it hard to remember why I wanted to be a part of this dance world in the first place. I often received comments from people telling me how “lucky” I was that I didn’t have to pay for classes, how “nice” it must be. Those comments always bothered me the most, but I couldn’t say what I really wanted to. I just smiled, and shrugged— always keeping my head down. I was there to dance. Growing up in an unconventional way in the dance world has made me deeply passionate about paying it forward, and providing kids in my same situation or worse, an equal opportunity. More outreach, more access, more high quality training at little-to-no cost—this is the world we need to strive for.

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