

Secrets of a Thriving Adult Dance Fitness Program

Part 5— The Experience



Patricia and I both left home when we were thirteen years old.

The day I met Patricia, our boarding arts school was holding an orientation meeting in Cranford Hall. I really didn't know anyone yet. As we filed in and tried to find a seat, I noticed a girl with long brown hair sitting toward the front of the auditorium on the left. I thought she was pretty. As a rising ninth grader, the one social insight I had learned in the seventh and eighth grades was that if you wanted to be in the popular crowd, you'd better be friends with the "pretty girls," so I thought I was being really smart to sit beside her and make friends.

"Hi!" I said as I sat down. She smiled back. "Is this your first year too?" And so began our four-year high school friendship. Little did I know that we would both live on the same floors in Sanford and Moore dormitories over the next four years, be in exactly the same ballet classes twice a day, and have many of the same high school academic classes as well. That first day I couldn't have imagined the tears we would eventually share when our respective hearts were broken, the fun we would have dressing up for the annual Beaux Arts ball, the struggles we would face with our weight, the way our toes would bleed inside our pointe shoes, the sense of accomplishment we would experience in ballet class together when either of us finally hit our perfect double pirouettes, or the joy we would share during school dance performances. All I knew that day was that she was pretty, and I thought I was smart to be friends with the pretty girl.

The irony of it all, as I learned very quickly, is that the yardstick for being "popular" or "valuable" at my new school had nothing to do with having a pretty face and hair. The rating scales at my new school were talent and tenacity. Period. We had to audition to get into the school and then be "asked back" annually to stay there. What became quickly apparent is who among us had the most talent in our respective disciplines, be it in dance, music, visual arts, drama, or design and production. It did not take long to figure out who the best dancers were and therefore what the pecking order was. Patricia and I were among the youngest in the school – our High School challenge therefore was to apply every ounce of work ethic we could muster to whatever level of classical ballet talent we possessed and see where we landed four years later.

They say that people who share the same intense experience have an everlasting bond. I believe that. Maybe that is why so many corporate "team building" exercises put strangers in boats together, challenge team members to impossible goals, and try to simulate life-or-death team-building scenarios. It seems when you share an extremely intense experience together, you end up feeling deeply "known" by your partners in the experience...

Thirty years later, I watch Patricia loosen her pony tail and let her long beautiful hair tumble out and about. As she fluffs it, I notice how much her hair looks the same, except perhaps for the bit of gray that frames her face now.

"I really am interested in taking your online course," she says. "If all of your classes are like today's class, I think I would love teaching The Dancer's Workout® at my studio. In your online course, you say you explain how to attract the ideal types of adult students to classes and how to create a safe and self-sustaining environment. What else is included?"

There are so many things I want to tell her! It has taken me 8 years to learn how to build and sustain a vibrant adult dance community, and I'm bursting at the seams to explain the layers. I decide to build upon what I know she will understand and say, "The next piece of the puzzle is that you have to create a total experience, not just a class."

"What does that mean?" she asks. "The best way I can explain it is to ask you what you loved about dance when we were in high school? Filter out the bad stuff and tell me the good stuff..."

Without hesitation Patricia says, "I loved all my friends there. I loved talking in the bathrooms as we were getting ready for class and working together to learn choreography. I loved feeling like I was part of a group, like I belonged there."



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“What else? Tell me what you miss,” I push. She continues, “I miss feeling like I was doing something really exceptional with my classmates. And I loved that sense of satisfaction when we nailed it.” “Exactly!” I exclaim! “That’s the ‘shared experience’ part of it! It’s this intangible but very real sense of shared hard work with a specific community of people who make you feel included, important, and loved. The sense of accomplishment you feel from doing something super-hard together makes you feel a strong sense of acceptance and belonging.”

She smiled. She understood what I was saying. I watched her process it to the next, natural step. “Yes, but how do you create that as an adult dance instructor?” she asks. “You can’t do it alone, Patty. It takes a village. It takes an Alissa and a Sara and an Ashley, *etc.* It takes other adult students who love what you’re creating. It takes an amazing class of choreography that is *just above our heads*, delivered in a safe environment where everyone is free to work to the limits of their capacity and ability.”

“An adult ballet technique class is really hard too - why doesn’t a ballet class feel like this?” she wonders aloud. All I can figure is this: “Certainly some ballet classes do, especially when we’re younger and working so hard to please our teachers. But as we get older, 90 minutes of ballet isn’t as exhilarating as it once was. It’s hard to explain why. It just isn’t. Maybe it’s too hard on our bodies. The Dancer’s Workout® classes are better suited to the adult dancers’ bodies and capabilities.”

I continued, “Patty, have you noticed how when you meet someone who went to our High School you feel immediately connected to them, even if they attended during a different decade? There’s a common bond we have because of that shared experience – we immediately hold that person in high regard because we know their level of talent and the amount of discipline needed to survive in that school. Remember how EVERYONE inside those walls had the only attributes that mattered: talent and the discipline to work hard? EVERYONE was “valued” there and socially accepted simply because we were there. We “belonged” because we had been admitted to the school. No other criteria really mattered...

“There’s a similar sense of belongingness inside The Dancer’s Workout® community. You are an important member of the TDW family simply because you’re there, in class with us, willing and able to do it and trying so hard to keep up with it. These classes require an amazing amount of focus and discipline - you have to be completely “in the moment” for the entire hour. These classes are physically demanding and emotionally exhilarating! The classes and the TDW community offer a whole experience of discipline, hard work, personal accomplishment, and the enormous comfort of belonging to a group that achieves something spectacular by taking these classes day-after-day, week-after-week, month-after-month. It’s an emotional experience that is deeply bonding, extremely rare for adults, and utterly satisfying. This is what I mean when I say The Dancer’s Workout® is a whole experience, not just a class.

Silence. Patricia finally says, “You love it, don’t you?” “I love it so much, Patty!” The words tumble out of me as I suddenly well up with emotion. “It’s the most satisfying experience I’ve had as an adult. It makes me feel like I am home again, with my tribe. And I know it sounds... intangible... but it is real; and it is the essence of what we refer to as “the TDW Secret Sauce.” It is a key ingredient that binds the TDW dancers together and why we have such a large family of adult dancers.”

“Do you teach all of this in your course?” “Oh yes, Patty, I do! And so much more! Our online course teaches dance studio owners, and the dancers they sponsor to become TDW-Certified Instructors, how to *create and retain* a blockbuster community of adult dancers in their studios. My goal is to create this experience for dance studio owners, dance instructors, and adult dancers all across the US. This is my passion and my calling. Thank you for joining me.”

Interested in finding out more about the online course? We have more information [here!](#)

For more information about Jules and The Dancer’s Workout®, visit <http://www.thedancersworkout.com>

Jules Szabo is a UNC School of the Arts classical ballet graduate

Click [here](#) for her featured story on the UNCSCA website!

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