

## Dance Expressions performers win big at national competition as studio celebrates 20 years

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TEWKSBURY — Tucked behind a restaurant and a gas station, on the second floor of an unassuming brick building, a sign reading “Dance Expressions” hung between picture windows. Shiny purple and gold awards lined one of the windows, a sampling of the hundreds inside. Ribbons, certificates and trophies trimmed one of the walls in the studio lobby, with hallways overwhelmed by professional photos of owner Jessica Durante’s dancers.

Recently, Durante purchased office space across from her studio to accommodate more students. Despite the accolades decorating the space, she couldn’t explain how her membership keeps growing.

“I don’t advertise,” she said. “It’s all word of mouth.”

Durante did recognize the presence her dancers have in town. She often has her students perform at community events, like last week’s National Night Out. Still, she seemed shocked to say over 400 individual dancers attend her classes.

For 20 years, Durante has taught ballet, contemporary, jazz, tap and hip-hop to kids just learning to walk and those who glide in pointe shoes. Her students have gone on to perform at competitions in Las Vegas and work at Disney Parks.

To Durante, bragging about titles and triumphs takes second place to fun and loving dance. While her students work hard, she ensures they’re comfortable in class and enjoying what they do — with a healthy dose of tough love as needed.

“It’s a love-hate relationship,” said Durante. “I tell them, ‘some days you’ll love me, some days you’ll hate me.’”

Her relaxed approach is different from certain reality television dance instructors who bark orders and pit girls against each other. Durante said her students know she would only be disappointed in them if they lost the award given to the most respectful studio.

Durante added, “Every single competition that has [the award], we’ve gotten it.”

To alleviate some of the stress of competing, Durante only has her dancers perform in regional events a few months out of the year and in national competitions every other year.

“It’s less pressure,” said Kristen Hamwey, one of the studio’s instructors. “We’re here to have fun and if we do well, that’s a bonus.”

Still, her dancers rarely come home from competitions empty-handed.

At the Backstage Performing Arts regional competition in Chelmsford this May, Dance Expressions senior tap company earned a free trip to the National Backstage Performing Arts Competition in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Five of those secured an invitation to dance with the National Dance Team at Hershey Park.

“Our kids did really well,” said Durante. She brought fifty groups, trios, duos and solos to Hershey, with most placing in their overall category and a few taking home major wins. “I was completely shocked by how well they did.”

Competing against 552 groups showing off their skills in various genres, the senior tap company took fourth place for a group dance, Jamie Burger and Ariana Perron won seventh place overall for their tap duo, and Burger's solo secured her the title of national champion.

The honor came as quite a surprise to Burger, who took home awards for her performance at various local and regional competitions this year.

Winning did not come easy. During the school year, Burger spent her Mondays and Tuesdays in the studio from the time she got out of school until 9 p.m., with less lengthy rehearsals during the rest of the week. Sarah Reich of renowned tap group Syncopated Ladies was brought in to choreograph her routine.

"[Durante] always brings in guest choreographers," said Burger. "It's a really good opportunity."

Burger has been dancing since she was four and plans on auditioning for the dance company at the University of Rhode Island. For her, awards are secondary to the loving community she found at Dance Expressions.

"At our studio, we're surrounded by a lot of positive people," said Burger. "We all do it because we love it."

With construction of the expanded studio space underway, Durante plans to resume classes per usual on September 12, with no promise to her students that they will go to a national competition. Typically, her students go every other year.

"I think it's refreshing for the kids," said Durante. "You have to work for it. But we're still probably going to Disney next year."

*Editor's Note:*

*Noa Barakin, a choreographer with Dance Expressions, was instrumental in helping the dancers achieve success in their competitions.*

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