

As I warmed up in the small ballet studio crammed with about twice as many dancers as it was intended to fit, I quickly found myself unable to focus on my own warmups. But that all changed when the judges entered. The familiar sound of pointe shoes brushing on the floor and the thuds caused by the great force of dancers landing jumps all suddenly ceased. It was time to audition.

I've been dancing since I was three years old, but that day was not a normal day in the studio. I was auditioning for the Summer Intensive at the Charlotte Ballet, a selective program that accepts only one hundred of the over one thousand dancers who audition. If accepted, I would spend five weeks in Charlotte, training almost eight hours a day, six days a week. The program would conclude with two repertory performances.

The audition was intense. Throughout the barre section of the audition, I had to trust my instincts and use all of my focus to try to hide how much I was putting into the simple combinations; after all, making the difficult look simple is the main job of a ballet dancer! During the centre portion of the audition, one of the most important things was understanding the combinations. One of the ways that dancers are often tested during auditions is by only being shown each combination just once. This highlights which dancers have the valuable skill of being able to pick up on the specifics of a combination the first time it is given. Luckily, in the weeks leading up to audition season, my studio would treat each company-level class like an audition so that we wouldn't panic when "audition rules" were suddenly expected of us. This allowed me to stick out when some of the more physically skilled dancers in the audition were unable to retain the combinations as they were given.

When the audition was over, I experienced conflicting senses of pride in my performance and doubted that I was good enough to be accepted to the Summer Intensive. I was also exhausted! After a few weeks of anxious anticipation, I couldn't believe it when I received an email from the Charlotte Ballet not only offering admissions but a full tuition scholarship. I was ecstatic to have the opportunity to take my dancing to the next level.

I had trained for years for moments like this, so seeing my hard work and dedication pay off was surreal. But what made this accomplishment even more meaningful to me was how unexpectedly my passion for dance developed. I did not find my way to dance on my own. As a kid, my doctors recommended I start dancing to help strengthen my lung weakness due to cystic fibrosis. At such a young age, dance was only intended to be a short-term form of exercise to keep my body healthy. However, as I grew, dance became an essential part of my life.

Dancers' dreams are often derailed by burnout or injuries that require long rehabilitation. Unfortunately, within two months of being accepted into the summer intensive, the world shut down due to the coronavirus pandemic. While the summer intensive was eventually held with the precaution of quarantining, as someone with CF, I was too at risk to participate. Similarly, the next school year, it was too much of a risk for me to even return to my studio.

While ballet is no longer my primary focus in life, I have no regrets about spending much of my childhood dedicated to the art. In addition to keeping my body healthy, I will always be grateful for the traits dance helped me develop: determination, the ability to push myself, stay calm under pressure, and not let others' opinions dictate how I live my life. In that way, part of me will always be a dancer.