

Rheesa Schachter
Born to Dance
by
Brian Campbell

Rheesa Schachter could very well have been born dancing. When she started out, dance was very limited; children learned ballet when they were young, and they might be able to take jazz when they were 13 or older, but not typically before then. Rheesa decided to do something about it.

“When I was 16 I decided that I should run a dance program for kids, because there wasn’t one,” she said. “So I went to my old elementary school and said that I wanted to teach a dance program for kids.” Thus Kids Etc’s Youth Movement Company was born.

She started with nine children, teaching only jazz dance since, not only did she love jazz dance, there were already many places for children to take ballet. Her classes grew over the next few years until she was teaching over 100 children. Upon graduating high school, she completed her Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Manitoba, while continuing to teach dance as a way of supporting herself.

“When I graduated, I took a job at a bank and planned to quit teaching dance,” Rheesa said. “But the parents said ‘no, you have to teach’, so I realized that I could have a full time job and still teach part-time.”

She continued teaching dance in her spare time while working her full time job at the bank. When her father became ill, it changed her perspective. Rheesa said, “I realized how much I loved dance and kids. I knew I needed to follow my passion rather than just have a ‘real job’.”

She decided to leave the bank and pursue the business of running a dance studio full time. She had studied dance at York University during her summers off from U of M and completed her Royal Academy of Dance ballet exams. That, combined with her Commerce degree, gave her the practical knowledge to start a dance

business. Since she already had a number of regular students, the first thing she needed to do was get additional instructors.

“I hired another instructor and then started training some teachers,” she said. “We have a unique philosophy. We encourage each dancer to achieve their personal best. It is very important to me that all of the dancers that come through here feel like family, feel like they’ve accomplished something and feel really great about what they can do. It is of paramount importance to myself and my faculty.

“The studio is at a point now where the majority of our teachers are home grown,” she added. “They incorporate our philosophy; they’ve lived it and they’ve breathed it.”

The studio has undergone many changes over the years, but even at the time she first opened it, Rheesa knew that she had to expand on her teaching. “As soon as I opened up the school I knew I couldn’t just do jazz. A studio should provide a variety of classes, such as ballet, modern, even musical theatre,” she said. “Lyrical and contemporary dance weren’t considered real disciplines when I started the school, but now they are huge. You evolve with the times.”

Over the years, Kids Etc’s has grown from Rheesa and one other instructor to a school that now has about 24 instructors, including Rheesa’s two daughters, Taylor and Jessica. “And many others who are like daughters to me,” added Rheesa.

Kids Etc’s has a number of success stories, including having one of their students, Jaimi Deleau, go on to become part of Canada’s Royal Winnipeg Ballet. “Jaimi is lovely,” Rheesa said. “We’ve had kids who have gone on to careers in film, and a student who has been on Broadway. We’ve also had doctors and lawyers and generally nice people. And that’s our philosophy: be nice. At our last competition, we won the Dance Spirit award for being really nice, caring, spirited and respectful. And that’s what I tell the kids is more important than anything.

“We are doing more than training kids for a dance career,” she added. “We are training kids to have confidence and be good people.”

In special circumstances, Rheesa does accept students in need on scholarship. She fondly recalls one such instance. “I got a phone call 22 years ago from Child and Family Services that they had a child who had emigrated from Sarajevo with her mother and sister and they wanted to find something for her to do and all she wanted to do is sing. Do I have anything for her? I said yes, of course. So she came to me and sang like an angel. She was lovely. By the time she graduated high

school she was singing and dancing full time. She is now in neurosurgery at MIT and her mother still thanks me.”

Now Kids Etc’s offers classes in jazz, tap, ballet, modern, lyrical, contemporary, hip hop and musical theatre; as well as specialized programs for preschoolers as well as adult programs. Rheesa refers to musical theatre as the triple threat; singing dancing and acting, which she teaches personally with her friend and co-instructor Bonnie Bricker and calls, “One of my favourite things to teach.”

Rheesa and Bonnie are currently working on a Summer Dance Camp for the Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba. Rheesa said, “It is just in the planning stages right now, but we plan to start a musical theatre and dance camp for them. We also open our classes to other groups as a way to give back to the community.”

According to Rheesa, Kids Etc’s Youth Movement Company is about “serious fun” and their tagline is “Be remarkable. My dad always said that my mother was a remarkable woman, so that has been a word that has always been important to me.”

Kids Etc’s is a true family business. Her daughters, Taylor and Jessica, grew up in the studio and studied jazz, tap, ballet and several other disciplines. “Then they started assisting me and are now two of my top competitive teachers,” Rheesa Said. “They are both looking at taking over the business eventually.”

But not yet. Not only is Rheesa not ready to retire yet, both girls are completing their education at U of M and Taylor wants to take a year off to travel when she completes her Psychology degree this year.

When Rheesa’s husband Paul is not at his regular job, he also helps out in the studio, doing what Rheesa referred to as, “Everything from plunging toilets to editing music to answering phones. In fact, he is so often involved in collecting dance fees from students, he is known in the studio as PayPaul,” she added with a smile. “He says that dance is my passion and I am his passion.”

With the whole family so involved in the dance studio, it is sometimes difficult to step away from the business. Rheesa admitted, “We go out for dinner and say ‘we aren’t going to talk about dance tonight’ but somehow the subject comes right back around to dance.”

She also loves travelling with her family and spending time with them. “My daughters are my two best friends and beautiful human beings,” she said fondly.

Rheesa is a long time Linden Woods resident. “I drove by it every day while it was being developed when I was going to University,” she recalled. “I thought that I would like to have a house here. And now I do”

At some point Rheesa will step back and let her daughters take over the studio, but that time isn't here yet. She is still enjoying herself too much. “After almost 37 years of teaching dance in Winnipeg,” she said. “I can honestly say that I absolutely love what I do.”