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Leap To Success

If you have ever seen a stage performance or a recital of some sort, you may have thought to yourself, “Wow that looks so easy!” or “I can do better than those people!” Professional dancers and choreographers are aware that people have this presumption about dance. But in reality, there's a lot of work and dedication that goes into making their performances look effortless. For instance, “Competition dancers usually train and rehearse every day, often including weekends. They are most likely in the studio 15-25 hours a week” (Stecklein). Lauren Kato, a dance education teacher at Mountain View High School has dedicated her life to sharing her passion of dance with her students and has learned to recognize the importance of teaching the whole person.

All her life, Kato has been a people pleaser with a bubbly personality, character qualities that positively influence the lives of her friends and students every day. As a dance teacher, she strives to educate her students about this most expressive form of art by emphasizing performance qualities, self-expression through art, and the foundation of the learning process, where students themselves can understand and value how to integrate people's humanities into the practice of student-teaching. She also emphasizes the development of her students both inside and outside of dance. According to CASEL, Collaborative Academic Social Emotional Learning, “Social Emotional Learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and

achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Daly). Kato’s teaching approach is special: she creates personal relationships with students, making it easy for her to facilitate each individual’s process of improvement. By letting her students take the lead in exploring their own artistic abilities, Kato pushes her students to maintain a strong work ethic in order to achieve quality work. She often steps back and lets the student leaders figure things out, stepping in only when absolutely needed to get them back on track.

Kato was able to develop the skills of her teaching style with assistance from her students. From the age of two, she has always been involved with community building and started dancing after being inspired by the Nutcracker performed by the Boston Ballet in Massachusetts. She fell in love with dancing and performing when she first began taking classes at her grandmother's studio, and has continued to love dance ever since, according to her family. Starting at the age of three, Kato moved several times during her childhood but continued to dance with the people she loves. She’s been through many ups and downs throughout her life, as she tried to find what she wanted to pursue as a lifelong career. Reflecting on this experience, she believes that they trusted her abilities knowing that she had already danced with the president and vice-president of the program outside of school. At the time, there were only three classes, and if you did some sort of dance, including cheerleading or musical theater, you were typically considered an advanced dancer. Kato reflects, “I was really lucky that I got to be a part of it. I was one of two freshmen in the class and I loved it. I loved how when I was in there, I was one of the youngest people, but the upperclassmen took me in, showed me the way and modeled the way. I just felt safe there.” She saw the program as a safe and welcoming community where she

could be around the people she loved and do the things she loved. After thinking through potential majors she could study in college, she decided to keep pursuing her passion for dance.

About a year after graduating and earning her B.A. in Dance from Marymount Manhattan College in New York City, she received a phone call from her former dance director outside of school, asking if she would be willing to come back home to be the co-director at their dance studio in Mountain View. At her new job, she worked with many students, including some from Mountain View High School. Kato's former Dance Spectrum teacher Kathryn Rosburg eventually heard from her students that Kato had moved back to Mountain View. Soon after, Ms. Rosburg reached out to Kato in search of an assistant to fill in for her when she was helping her daughter with her Broadway auditions. Eventually, Ms. Rosburg's daughter landed a job on Broadway, leaving Kato to fill in as a co-director for Dance Spectrum, and then took over as the program's official fill-in director after Ms. Rosburg's daughter ended up having to take an extended period of time off after landing a job on Broadway.

When Kato discovered that Ms. Rosberg would no longer be teaching at Mountain View, she realized that in order to continue working with her students, she had to earn her teaching credential quickly. She enrolled in a program online, and with the pathway she had taken, she was able to be a temporary, short-time staff member for a semester. She continued to assist her students in the program and helped them produce their annual show in May for that school year. Unfortunately, she was let off after the first month of the following year, since she didn't have her credential yet. A new dance teacher had stepped in, but the choir director, Jill Denny, said, "You're not going anywhere" (Denny). So then Kato started helping in the choir department while she was continuing to do her credential and attending class. The same year, in February of 2016, she took the Advanced Jazz Class to New York City for a dance tour along with the

principal of the time. As soon as they arrived back home, Kato was interviewed and hired to be the new Dance Spectrum director by doing an internship her first year of teaching.

Today, Kato provides a dance education to students in an engaging and entertaining manner. She always shows all of her students genuine sympathy and support, and she makes use of this kindness to help her students grow both as dancers and as people. She occasionally has a tendency to be more strict, but she achieves a lovely balance between being sweet and assertive in order to make her point.

By allowing her students the ability to take the lead and learn from their mistakes, she has positively impacted their lives. Dance Spectrum has provided a safe space where students are able to be comfortable with fellow students leading their classes, by creating a fun environment no matter which grade or class you're in. "Student-led learning makes the classroom less of an "institution" and more of a community, encouraging all-around mutual support rather than competition and bullying" (Elder). For instance, when a group of choreographers don't communicate well with one another before teaching, the class that is attempting to learn often faces trouble since they are unsure of what is right and wrong. This helps students understand that making mistakes the first time around is acceptable, resulting in improvements in their emotional development. In fact, "teachers' emotional intelligence abilities positively influence teacher efficacy. Having teachers who are apt to perceive and manage emotions will be salutary for the personal development of students, as well as for structuring a positive and self-regulating learning environment" (Valente). When student leaders of the program are in need of help, it encourages them to turn to Kato, and there's nothing wrong with needing help, as some may assume that they need to know everything perfectly. By focusing on honoring the humanity of

her students in this student-centered dance program, she has further expanded the wonderful community of dance for high school students throughout the years.

According to the U.S Department of Education, “In this model, learning is a constructive process that is relevant and meaningful to the learner and connected to the learner’s prior knowledge and experience. The learning environment supports positive interactions among learners and provides a supportive space in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated. Rather than trying to “fix” the learner, the learner has the power to master his or her world through the natural process of learning” (McCombs and Whistler). Teachers should remember that each student is different while acknowledging everyone's various learning styles. Some kids could be better at the subject than others, and keeping that in mind helps students feel more positive about their performance rather than inferior to their classmates. A safe environment where students can study and work on new material increases their motivation to complete their schoolwork. In other words, a healthy mind requires healthy surroundings.

When I asked Kato about how she adjusts the class curriculum according to the level of the dancers, she responded, “As a teacher that encounters students of all dance backgrounds, I adjust my curriculum to accommodate all dance journeys by starting from scratch because every year I have three beginner level classes and that's really where I get most kids that are maybe dancing for the first time. So I always go back to ballet basics.” Even when the advanced dancers go back to technique, they are still able to learn something new each class because no one can ever be perfect all the time. For example, perfectionism is often a common issue among the advanced dancers because they set the standards for themselves really high, and try to work and share their best work when performing in front of others. According to the IADMS, the

International Association for Dance Medicine & Science, “For a dancer with low self-esteem and high stress levels, chances are high that goals of perfect performance become overly demanding and upcoming shows feel like impending doom rather than exciting challenges” (Nordin-Bates). A dancer may experience a range of emotions while performing. It could have either positive or negative effects on different people. Dancers with poor self-esteem and high levels of stress perceive that they are not giving their best performance, which prevents them from enjoying the stage at that moment in time. Kato continues, “Although ballet is not necessarily the foundation of all dances and dance styles, there is technique and positions and movements within ballet that are really consistent throughout the majority of different dance styles.” In fact, that’s true in most cases, especially when it comes to student-centered learning. Not only do you see your friends as people you love to hang out with, but sometimes they take over a leadership role of some sort and you get to see them as a “different person”. Kato was dancing with her best friend, when she realized the significance of student-centered learning: “I choreographed with one of my good friends my freshman year, which was huge because I was a shy person and even my best friend was in the program with me my senior year, our junior and senior years, and I came in to teach one of her classes because she was in the Jazz Dance class one day, and she was like, ‘Oh my gosh! Like, Lauren, you're a different person when you're teaching.’ And I was like, I know. I'm actually confident and not like the weird, quirky one, but it was just a safe space where I felt comfortable to be a leader”.

As Kato looks ahead into the future, she hopes to have left a legacy in the Dance Spectrum community. She is the first full-time dance teacher at Mountain View High School, which is very exciting for her, considering that she is back at her own high school. More importantly, she is able to share her love for dance with different sets of students each year. “I

think Dance Spectrum is going to continue to grow. Even from last year to this year, there's an increase in enrollment, especially as we've doubled our freshman enrollment for next year. And I just think as we continue to have more shows and performances, again in-person, where students are able to come and see what it's all about, that that will help enrollment increase and more and different types of students will continue to feel comfortable joining,” says Kato. From experience I can say that our show last year, and our first in-person show back from COVID was such an amazing experience for me, and after the show lots of people came up to me to ask how they could sign up for the program. She believes that the program is still growing, and is trying to rebuild the male population since it is pretty low, whereas it used to be a lot higher overall. She adds, “I'm really hopeful that that population grows and there's just more diversity in gender and in ethnicity and race as well” (Kato). Kato’s education style has helped many students grow over the years, to learn to focus on themselves first, and that making mistakes is part of becoming a stronger person and student leader.

“I think that being a dance teacher at a public school isn't just teaching dance, but it's teaching the whole human being and just listening and supporting and nurturing everything about the students. And that's really what I love. And I don't know, I just love my job. It's the best job on the planet” (Kato).