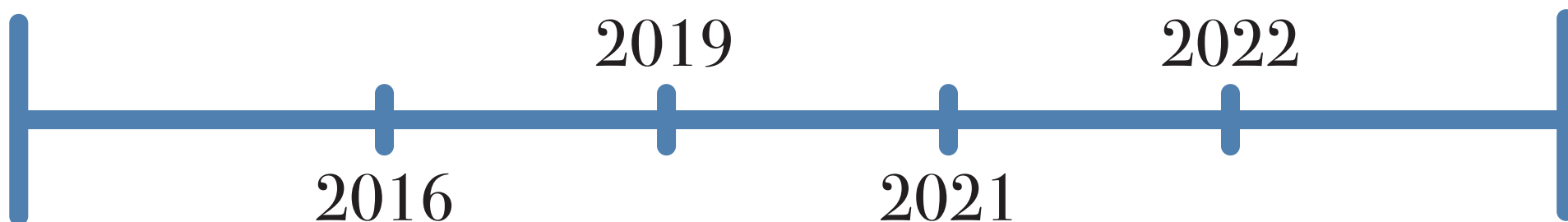




Molly Drown (pictured on the left) and I rehearse the "Giselle" Act One Variation Oct. 26, 2019. *Photo by Amy West*



I introduce my self-choreographed piece at Trinity Laban's Centre for Advanced Training program. *Photo by Mary Kinsella*



My cousin Lindsay Appleby congratulates me with flowers after watching me perform as a Polichinelle in "The Nutcracker" December 2016. *Photo by Robin Appleby*



Daneworks Ballet Academy holds its summer intensive program online due to COVID-19 restrictions Aug. 10, 2021. *Photo by Eden Leavey*

Dance shapes personal mindset, core beliefs

COMMENTARY

Eden Leavey /
Culture Editor: Print

Engage fully. Act professional. Look the part. Dedicate your entire self. Early is on time. On time is late. Although there are countless others, these are some of the key principles of being a dancer that instructors ingrained in my head since I was a young child.

At age 3, my parents decided to enroll me in a creative movement class in hopes of combating my incessant fidgeting. I have been a "bunhead" – a dedicated ballerina – ever since. As a shy child, not only did baby ballet classes serve as a space for exercise and creativity, but they provided me with an opportunity to express myself non-verbally.

Alongside these key principles – for which I am grateful to have embodied – are a multitude of negative thinking patterns that dancers often develop, including low self-esteem, body dysmorphia, eating disorders and all-or-nothing thinking.

In dance, particularly bal-

let, we strive to be perfect. Yet, perfection is not an attainable goal, thus leaving many dancers feeling as if their hard work and dedication will never be enough. I was, and sometimes still am, one of those dancers.

However, my negative thinking patterns developed incrementally over the years, at such a slow rate that I barely noticed how much they altered my mindset in regards to ballet.

During my early years, I simply loved the experience of being in classical ballets, such as "The Nutcracker," and the joy of dancing on stage. But, over time, the satisfaction I felt after a performance began to wear away, and in its place was a deep, unfulfilled river of what I believed to be my potential as a dancer.

I worried that with each imperfection of my body, my dance career would undoubtedly amount to nothing due to problems with my technique, my flexibility and my strength. Despite the develop-

ment of these negative thinking patterns, I persisted with ballet due to my undying love for repertoire and the dance community. These two elements working in tandem convinced me that the physical and psychological pain was worth suffering.

Herein lies the most detrimental issue within the ballet world: the normalization of dismissing one's needs for the sake of appearing as the "perfect" image of a dancer.

For instance, during my time in the studio, I have observed dancers competing with one another to see who is the better calorie estimator, friends going on diets with the intention of losing an unhealthy amount of weight together and severe judgment around eating habits, particularly the consumption of junk food or snacks.

One of my most memorable experiences transpired during a dress rehearsal before the opening night of "The Nutcracker,"

the first show in which I was cast as a soloist. I was 13 at the time, standing in the wings of the stage when suddenly, one of the older dancers I looked up to fainted a mere two feet away from me due to starvation.

Although she regained her strength quickly after some rest and a juice box, no one seemed especially concerned by the incident, and the dancer who passed out said it was a common occurrence when she had skipped too many meals.

Body dysmorphia began to feel like a rite of passage; you start ballet, you get your pointe shoes and then you develop your eating disorder.

As my negative thinking patterns developed through the years, I concurrently began taking modern and contemporary dance classes. While becoming a ballerina had always been my dream, I enjoyed participating in something different, primar-

ily because my physique was more equipped to execute that style of movement, but also because the environment surrounding contemporary dance was much more inclusive. I never felt out of place or upset with my reflection in the mirror during class.

When COVID-19 hit and we transitioned to virtual classes, I lost all motivation to continue dancing.

Without true performance opportunities and the in-person support of my fellow dancers, I felt my love for dance slip away. To keep it from burning out forever, I pulled away from my passion until I could step back into an actual studio.

Unfortunately, my ballet company was unable to stay afloat due to the pandemic, and by the time I was ready to return this past summer, I needed to find a new place to dance.

So, when looking for another company, I researched programs with a greater em-

phasis on contemporary dance and a curriculum dedicated to tackling the prevalence of eating disorders in the dance community.

Now, I'm a member of Shift, a youth performance company that specializes in contemporary dance, and I'm a student at Trinity Laban's Centre for Advanced Training, both of which provide a safe and supportive environment. Additionally, I have developed a more recent passion for choreography and creating movement. I am currently working with a group of dancers as a youth choreographer, which is playing a crucial role in helping me reinvigorate my passion for dance.

Despite the inevitable adversity within any dance environment, I have been able to overcome the majority of my negative thinking patterns and preserve my love of the art form over the years. I am thankful for the resilience ballet has taught me and cannot wait to see how my relationship to dance will flourish.

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