

Pirouette Into the Shadows of Ballet

Hope Hoffmeister ~ February 19th, 2023

TW Sensitive topics covered such as eating disorders



We were sitting in our living room. She was on the black leather couch with her feet up on the coffee table, I was on the seat across from her with my legs crisscrossed applesauce. She had only been my roommate for a month, but she was open to sharing her experiences, so when I asked her for an interview, she happily obliged. We admired our view of the mountains, grass, pond, and solar panels outside through the sliding glass door of the living room. The apartment is cold, but not cold enough to put on a sweater. She had a slight glimmer in her eye as if she was saying, “I’m excited to start.”

Chloe, my roommate, is a couple of years older than me, and all I knew about her was that she was a

transfer last year, a political science major, from Huntington Beach, and has done ballet for 18 years. I figured if anyone could give some insight into the beauty and struggle of ballet, it would be her.

Soft, delicate, and precise are words that often define ballet. It seems like more of an art form rather than a sport. But according to former ballerina Jacklyn Dougherty, ballet is both a sport and an art form because of the “physical and choreographic demands it puts on the participants.” As someone who was never keen on sports or extracurriculars growing up, I was always impressed when I would hear my friends talk about how they went to practice every day or had games and performances every weekend. I couldn’t understand why anyone instantly put themselves through that physical strain.

“Dance can be harmful to people.”

Chloe

and I

started by shedding light on the body and the skinny culture of ballet, a prevalent issue in many female-dominant sports. Growing up, Chloe’s friend group from her ballet classes all went to her high school. They would hang out during lunch, class, and outside of school. She would notice things about certain girls in the group, and one girl, in particular, was very thin. C She would only “consume lemon water with cayenne pepper because she thought that it would increase her metabolism,” Chloe said. When Chloe and her friends went to her ballet instructor for help, concerned about their friend’s health, her instructor’s only comment was: “Compliment how she looks to make her feel better about herself.”

Wow. When I heard this, I actually had to pause for a moment.

The fact that her instructor wouldn't even help her own student, who was clearly ill, is just plain repulsive. During this interview, I got the sense that instructors typically are unconcerned about eating disorders (ED) and other illnesses. We see this is true in many other areas, such as models who also struggle with ED who aren't being aided and football players being put in games, despite sustaining a concussion, when they clearly shouldn't play.

Chloe recalls how teachers would tell students, "Suck in your stomach,"



instead of using other keywords such as core or abdomen, or other keywords. This can play a role in how youth perceive themselves. Chloe also mentions, "Instructors would make comments about our legs being too big," says Chloe. "Ballerinas usually look skinny because it is all about the lines, right? Well, if you had a butt or your legs or calves were too big, the teachers would pick on you."

Despite these challenges, Chloe doesn't seem to hate ballet. She did it for 18 years, starting when she was 4 and continuing on until she became a teacher for her senior year, and even after for a few years. She moved multiple times to different studios to follow her instructors. She was taught

classical ballet at her studio and grew up with most of the girls in her classes. She remains best friends with two girls she met in ballet class. She then worked in a physical therapy clinic for multiple years after high school because she wanted to learn more about how to treat and manage injuries. Chloe doesn't regret her years of ballet, as she learned a lot of amazing skills and traits such as flexibility,

“ No matter what time of year it was, we'd always tell whoever was hooking us to do the tightest row even if that hurt our ribs and[we]were genuinely in pain. We would suck it in and tell whoever was buttoning us to do the tightest row.

Why?

Because we thought it would make us look skinny. ”

persistence, and group work.

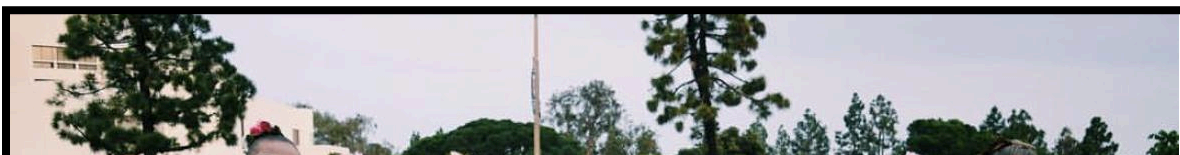
However, the culture behind ballet and the toxic drama and cliques within groups did take a toll. Chloe didn't realize how bad the skinny culture was until she got out of ballet. a study from the National Library of Medicine found that “Dancers had a three times higher risk of suffering from eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa and EDNOS.” Chloe wasn't shocked to hear the statistic and neither was I. It was just heartbreaking.

As we continued our interview, she noticed the sun setting over the mountains. She then recalled a time from her years in ballet that she was surprised she had forgotten about. Her instructor created a 'no-sugar 'challenge' for the month of October, which prohibited any of the girls from eating food with added sugar., natural sugar such as fruit was allowed, but anything with added sugar was a no-no. Peanut butter and tomato sauce were the biggest shockers as many of the girls didn't realize that

they had added sugars in them. Her director eventually put up a poster in the studio, where they would track how many days the dancers were sugar-free. As all of the girls went to high school together, they would constantly keep each other in check. Chloe reflects that “Not only were we feeling shitty because we weren’t allowed to have sugar but we also would be sitting in a group at lunch and if someone was eating sugar, all of us would turn into **rabid animals**.” Chloe chuckled at the flashback as if it was funny, but she rolled her eyes and rocked back and forth on the sofa, so much so that the black leather was squeaking.

. For young girls, this could be incredibly confusing and immensely hurt their self-image and eating habits. Although this was just one dance studio, I am sure many do similar “challenges.” Chloe agreed that lots of ballet studios have ongoing issues with body image, sugar, and self-esteem. Typically, teachers would even pick students who looked the thinnest, or most fit, to play the lead roles.

The challenge started in October. Her director at the time announced a “no sugar challenge,” which prohibited any of the girls from eating food with added sugar. If it was a natural sugar such as fruit, that was allowed, but anything with added sugar was a no-no. Peanut butter and tomato sauce were the biggest shockers as many of the girls didn’t realize that they had added sugars in them. Her director eventually put up a poster in the studio, where they would track how many days you were sugar-free. Also as I mentioned before, all of the girls went to high school together so they would constantly keep each other in check. Chloe reflects that “Not only were we feeling shitty because we weren’t allowed to have sugar but we also would be sitting in a group at lunch and if someone was eating sugar, all of us would turn into **rabid animals**.”



As we were talking about this, she chuckled at the flashback as if it was funny to her, but I could also tell it was still upsetting to her presently as she rolled her eyes and rocked back and forth on the sofa, so much so that the black leather was squeaking. We continued with the interview and, although it lasted more than an hour, she never seemed to be bored and was excited to share more information with me. She explained how when she became a ballet teacher, as previously mentioned, she was also able to gain a new perspective on ballet. After quitting ballet due to conflicting schedule times in college and drama within her age group, she decided to teach ballet instead. When she was a kid, she was always a demonstrator, which is basically an assistant teacher. However, it was volunteer work and she never got paid for it. She would just show up to the baby classes and assist the teacher. She enjoyed the experience but wasn't getting rewarded in any way. She then found out she could get paid to do the same thing starting at 16, which jump-started her teaching days. She says, "I quit dancing when I was a senior because I kind of had a bad experience. Towards the end, people get really cutthroat and it's really intense when you're an older dancer. I enjoyed hanging out with the kids [and] when I was teaching I usually would only teach kids from ages like three to nine."

She told me that one of her passions was helping people out which could have aided in her need to teach. I thought it was interesting that even though she didn't want to dance anymore she still wanted to teach the new generations. When Chloe teaches, she strives to stop the toxic environment of Ballet and aims to make kids feel comfortable in their own skin. She tells kids to tighten their core, teaches them conditioning skills to prevent injury, and tries to be a mentor if anyone is struggling with issues.

Even though there's a lot of darkness behind the dance, Chloe still relishes the good times she had and the discipline she learned. "Dance is an outlet for creativity, and I love that," Chloe says thoughtfully, looking out at the setting sun. I also liked the focus on being very well-balanced and gaining skills that will last me throughout my life. I felt smart when I was dancing because a lot of it was brain teaser exercises and strengthening my memory." She stood up from the couch, closed the blinds, said our goodnights, and twirled off into the night.

References

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