

## Students say they learn to work hard, perform well and believe in themselves

Rachel Stewart, 14, first discovered her passion for dance at the age of three. Six years ago, she joined the Starchevski School of Ballet.

"I really enjoy it," Rachel said. "I've tried other schools and I either find them really boring or not strict enough. Some don't push you enough. I think there's a good balance at Starchevski."

Rachel said she's learned more than just good technique since joining the school.

"Dance has taught me patience and not to be so hard on myself," she said. "I can see myself improving. And I think it helps with getting more comfortable with your body. You learn not to be so self-conscious because you're walking around in your body suit all the time."

Rachel's instructor and part owner of the Starchevski School of Ballet, Kristof Starczewski, left home at age 11 to pursue ballet.



Hanna Starczewski poses in the studio where she teaches her classes. Photo: Ashley Freeman/ Calgary Journal

"I lived on a farm in Poland with my family and they asked us, 'Who wants to go to ballet school?' I said I did," Kristof Starczewski said. "But I didn't know what ballet meant. I'd never seen it. I just wanted to go for the trip. I didn't realize it'd be eight years. But then I really liked it."

After graduating from the National Ballet School of Poland, Starczewski met his future wife, Hanna. Both danced professionally worldwide before moving to Canada to teach.

"The difference is we teach a Russian school," he said. "Other schools teach the British Royal

Academy of Dancing. We teach that as well, but we teach both. The Russian method is unique because due to communism, it was closed and they didn't want to share it. Myself and Hanna had Russian teachers so we want to share this with the students."

"Ballet is ballet," Hanna Starczewski said. "The technique is the same. But the Russian method requires more turned out feet than the Royal Academy of Dancing because Russian deals with students with the natural ability to turn out their feet. You kind of have to be born with it. But an average child who is committed can eventually learn."

Hanna Starczewski, is co-owner of the school and said students with the natural ability to learn the Russian method are the ones she pushes.

Starchevski School of Ballet offers classes for moms and tots, and children between the ages of 10 and 16.

"This is a recreational school," Kristof Starczewski said. "Any child can come here and register and then we will put the child into the right level of classes. We offer ballet, jazz and hip-hop. Ballet is the most demanding. You need to have the right posture, and you need to have turnout and long muscles."

There are eight levels of classes, ranging in degree of difficulty. Students receive certificates at the end of each year for passing their level. Not only must students work hard and be committed, it is necessary for them to look the part as well.

Kristof Starczewski added: "We have attire. No nail polish. The classical ballet is very pure. You wear ballet shoes and a ballet shirt with not much decoration. The hair is smooth. We follow the discipline and tradition from the past."

While their traditions may come from the past, the school has successfully created professional ballerinas of the present.

"From time to time, we have somebody who becomes a professional dancer," Kristof Starczewski said. "That does happen. But this is maybe five per cent of the dancers from all ballet schools in Calgary because it's so demanding."

The school focuses more on the element of performance than on competing.

"As an artist, you want to say something through your dance to the audience, Hanna Starczewski noted. "And you don't want to be judged for this. You want to speak to the people. That's what we want to pass to the students."

Starchevski School of Ballet does two performances a year, in December and May, at the University of Calgary. All students participate in the performances.