

VINEYARD GAZETTE

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His father is a ferry boat captain. His mother is a store manager. His brothers play ice hockey at the regional high school and race sailboats. But 14-year-old Oak Bluffs native Devon Lodge has spent the past 10 years of his young life doing something decidedly different.

He dances ballet.



Now 14, he has been dancing since the age of four

And as hundreds of Islanders and visitors saw for themselves at the recent Built on Stilts Dance festival where he performed more than once during the eight-day event — he's really good.

This week, the 2007 Oak Bluffs School graduate took the next step toward a professional career as a ballet dancer — he moved off Island, into a dormitory at Walnut Hill, the internationally renowned high school for the arts in Natick.

Ballet will no longer be an after-school activity that takes up all of Devon's free time and separates him from most of his peers. It will be an in-school activity that takes up all of his free time and introduces him to teenagers with the same interests.

"I started dancing [ballet] at four because whenever my mother put music on, I started dancing," he recalled, sitting on his front porch early this week the day before leaving the Vineyard, freckled and wet-headed after a day at the beach. "I just remember how all of the kids would cry. It was kind of like a day thing for them. Their parents kind of pushed them into it."

Devon loved ballet from the start.

He studied with the Sargent School of Ballet for four years and the Vineyard School of Ballet for two years, before becoming a student of Lori Cunningham and Martha's Vineyard Dance Theatre.

"It was getting harder, but I still climbed to the top easily. I needed a bigger challenge. Lori Cunningham gave me that challenge — and still does," he said. "She really cracked down and was very strict and it helped a lot."

That discipline helped him join Walnut Hill's intensive six-week summer programs in ballet, which he attended this summer and last. The summer program solidified his decision to move off-Island for his high school years.

"You kind of progress by the people around you and when no one around you wants to progress, you don't have the heart to keep doing it," he said, adding:

"For awhile, I didn't want to go away. I was really scared about it. But after the intensives, I decided going off-Island was the best choice."

He is open about the fact that being a male ballet dancer has not always been easy.

"In fifth grade, everyone was picking on me and stuff because that's when everyone gets into groups. I wanted to stop [dancing], but my mother encouraged me to keep doing it. She always thought that one day I'd be famous, so she gave me the heart to do it."

After getting through that year, he loved dancing even more.

"All of the kids stopped making fun of me and I started to get over the fact that they were. I stopped caring what they thought," he said. "All of my friends really support me and come to all my shows. Anyone who thinks bad of me, that's their problem."

Of course, his older brothers Tristan, 17, and Conor, 16, still make fun of him a bit. "But they're my older brothers. It's kind of their job," he said good naturedly. His father, James A. Lodge, former captain of the ferry Islander and current captain of the Martha's Vineyard, is also supportive — even if he doesn't exactly like ballet itself.

His maternal grandmother, Irene Monaco, was always enthusiastic about his dancing. She died recently, and Devon dedicated his solo dance at Built on Stilts to her.

"Everyone said I got all of my performing from her," he said. "Whenever we were together, we'd just sing and dance."

Dancing gave Devon Lodge a feeling and an escape he could not find elsewhere.

"That was the only time I really expressed myself. If there was anything going on, I would dance," he said. "It's a time when you can forget about it. It's like going into a whole different world."

He also learned early on that being a male ballet dancer has its advantages. While hoards of girls (and their mothers) compete — sometimes viciously — to stand out and move forward as ballerinas, boys are few and far between in the dance world, especially in the ballet world. In Devon's intensive ballet program this summer, there were nine boys and 62 girls.

“Everyone’s looking for boys. With the girls, it’s so competitive — a lot of the girls quit really early,” he said. “For guys, it’s a lot more laid back and you automatically get into everywhere.”

Unless they become overconfident, he quickly cautioned.

“You can’t let your ego get a hold of you,” he said, noting that some boys will skip stretching. “My roommate got really hurt this summer. He got a stress fracture.”

He sometimes wonders what his life would be like if his mother, Karen Lodge, a manager of LeRoux at Home, had not signed him up for ballet classes when he was four. Most of the other activities he enjoys — sailing, writing, hanging out with friends — went on the back burner as he dedicated more and more time to ballet.

“I don’t like to think of it this way, but you kind of threw away your whole childhood for it, so by sixth grade, I thought, well I can’t quit now,” he said.

But he’s happy with the sacrifices he has made to stick with dance.

“I think it’s better to strive for something than try to be popular,” he said.

There won’t be much time for other activities at Walnut Hill. After taking two academic classes every morning, dance classes begin at 2 p.m. and run until around 9 p.m., with a dinner break in between. He’ll see his family once a month. But the sprawling campus is scenic and tranquil, and time not spent dancing will be relaxing and social, he said.

It’s all aimed toward a career in ballet.

“I’m going to see where I am as a senior or a junior and see if I’m good enough to get into a nice dance company,” he said thoughtfully. American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet are his top two choices. “Boston is good, but I’d like to reach for the bigger ones so I have something to fall back on later.”