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Author

Shimko, Carissa

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Dance to connect to others—and also find yourself

Social dancers who learn to have fun and not worry about being judged might have a lesson for trained performers onstage—don't lose the enjoyment that brought you to dance in the first place

by Carissa Shimko

Meet Nick Valladares, who is 32 years old and originally from Dallas, Texas. Having grown up with a Mexican/Latino cultural background, he feels as though his cultural and educational background played a big role in his interest and involvement with dance. Nick attended Catholic schools in Texas for most of his life until attending the Naval Academy for college. Dance, even through many different scenarios, appears to have played a role throughout most of his life. He has immersed himself in many different styles, attempting to train in one, learning, practicing, and performing in another, as well as dancing socially just for enjoyment and entertainment.

This interview appeared to be a pleasant experience for him and it was clear that he enjoyed reflecting on how the art form has evolved throughout his life so far. We talked about his experiences in dancing from a younger age to today. My questions allowed him to consider how dance has played a role in his life, whether he was physically moving or just watching. We also discussed an article that talked about popular culture and social dance. It brought up concerns about how dance has changed over the years through technology, media, and popular culture; this article sparked even more conversation about his life and growth through dance.

Nick's first experience with dancing was at family parties when he was younger. The adults were always having a good time dancing Bachata, Cumbia, Salsa, and other styles and he would want to join in on the party. He remembers being pretty shy, but since the adults and the rest of his family were very encouraging, they made him feel more comfortable. It was particularly fun for him to have the music on and be consumed in the enjoyment along with everyone else who was dancing. Around first grade he remembers there being a mother at his school who wanted to teach all of the kids traditional Mexican dances. Since most of his friends were doing it, he decided that he wanted to join in. However, when he actually started training with her, he disliked how the lessons were repetitive and rigid. The constant recital of the steps and the strictness enforced by the teacher made him uninterested.

When he was younger he was extremely shy and embarrassed when it came to dancing in front of people; however, at one point, he came to the conclusion that he needed to just "fake it till he made it" so that he could actually enjoy dancing rather than always being nervous. Even if he didn't look like a good dancer, he said, he would look like he was having fun, and that would be winning in the end. He stopped worrying about impressing people. He was in college when this transition happened, so he and his friends were going out to places where they could dance. He wanted to feel more confident, so he would try his best. Plus, he was with friends who he felt comfortable around and always had a good time. By being in college, growing older, becoming more independent and confident, and being more accepting of the way he danced, he was able to have more fun.

In college, Nick gained more interest in the style, music, and culture of the dances he knew from growing up. He and a friend had a shared interest in Salsa, Cumbia, and other dance

forms, so they began to go out to clubs and would try to learn more steps. He described this experience as a nice contrast to their everyday lives, which were full of military duties. What started out as a hobby with basic steps for fun, turned into creating a whole dance routine for a big performance. They had found out about a ball where midshipmen from all over came together to show off the culture of everyone at the Naval Academy. He and his friend were invited to perform.

After about a month of creating and constantly repeating their routine, the couple performed their piece at the ball and had a really great time. He said that he was pretty nervous, but he was also confident since they had rehearsed so much. He remembers messing up and spinning her too early at one point, causing her to step on her dress; but, fortunately, they were both able to play it off and keep going. Overall, it was exciting for him to be on stage with a partner whom he really liked, sharing something special to both of them, and just being able to encourage each other and have a memorable experience.

Nick now goes dancing with friends at clubs or parties. Currently, he is a member of a yacht club where there was a ball a few weeks ago. He went by himself but was able to dance with some of the other members, just having fun. He also mentioned that he enjoys freestyling with some hip hop moves at parties with what he likes to call "Nick style." He has tried country dancing, ballroom dancing, and even breakdancing. At the roller rink where he grew up there was a big area that was meant for little kids to practice skating, but the older kids would take it over and do breakdancing. Whatever the style, he really enjoys listening to the music, moving and grooving around with it, and getting to hang out with people who are doing the same. In the end, that's when dance makes him feel the happiest.

One of Nick's most memorable stories from the dancing and dating aspect in his life was at a homecoming dance in the 6th grade. He wanted to dance with a girl that he liked, though he really did not know how and was extremely shy. But he had a big crush on her and finally took his chance to dance with her. He said that even though she was really polite about it, his friends made fun of him the next day and that he was pretty embarrassed. Nonetheless, it was an excuse for him to be close to her; since they went to a Catholic school where they weren't able to kiss or be romantic, dancing provided a memorable experience for him.

In a *New York Times* article by Heather Havrilesky called, "Why Don't We Dance Anymore?" she describes the social dance culture as not being the same now as it was years ago. That back in the day, she said, dance moves were cool and hip fads, and everyone would try to imitate what they saw in popular movies or on MTV. Now, popular dance moves evolve from the streets and are streamed on YouTube and social media as intense routines for the trained dancers, or they are jokes, something to be funny for those who are not trained. Back in the day you could turn on the TV and find programs such as *American Bandstand* or *Soul Train* and see a big group of people dancing and bouncing to the music as a whole. It was cool and interesting, so people would be inspired to dance like that in social settings.

Today, we see dance through viral videos on social media. Mainstream dance moves are passed through different groups of people in a much different way than the older generations experienced. Now popular dance moves are either taken to the professional level with a sense of making moves look really good and uniform, while simpler moves are streamed online as funny jokes or trends that are dorky to perform.

Nick's response to this article was that when he was growing up he used to be less self-conscious about what other people thought about his dancing. He would simply enjoy the music and the company of those around him. In middle school, he became more self-conscious and was

made fun of for not dancing the right way because of how it was portrayed in media and the movies. There was an established right way to dance that emulates what you see on television and this made him self-conscious because he looked different. However, he learned to grow past the mainstream mentality and learn to enjoy dancing for himself rather than dancing for others.

As a trained dancer, I think it is often easy to be consumed with dancing for others and to also be concerned with not looking or feeling good enough. We put so much pressure on ourselves, it leads us to think negative thoughts and to be unhappy with ourselves. If I learned anything about my interview and conversation with Nick, it is this—dancing is beautiful. It has the ability bring people together in a space where they can enjoy themselves, and it has the ability to make people happy. If I, as a trained dancer, were to stop caring so much about what other people were thinking, I would be able to tune into that special something that brings me happiness when I dance, and truly dance for myself.

Reference:

Havrilesky, Heather. “Why Don’t We Dance Anymore?” *The New York Times Magazine*. The New York Times Company, October 11, 2013.