

HEADING BACK TO
THE *Barre* WITH
*Aspen Santa Fe
Ballet's School*

YOUNG DANCERS LEARN GRIT,
GRACE, AND RESILIENCE

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY
ROSALIE O'CONNOR & MICHAEL ALVAREZ.

In June, David Gabriel, a 16-year old from Glenwood Springs, was awarded a two-year, full scholarship to Central Pennsylvania Youth Ballet, a troupe that has been turning out some of the ballet world's top professional dancers for the past 50 years.

"He's worked very hard for this, and all that hard work is paying off," comments Aspen Santa Fe Ballet School Director Melanie Dorskocil. "He's a brilliant dancer, extremely disciplined. He has an innate understanding of technique. He also dances jazz. I'm glad that they saw that."

Gabriel is one of multiple ASFB students who have gone on to prestigious stages across the U.S. and abroad. Right now, one is completing her training in Russia; another is dancing at the Nutmeg Conservatory in Connecticut. AFSB school alumni have gone on to careers with the New York City Ballet, Washington Ballet, Pittsburgh Ballet Theater, the Julliard School, San Francisco Ballet, and Pacific Northwest Ballet, as well as ASFB.

Nearly 300 boys and girls drawn from towns scattered from Rifle to Aspen are currently studying with ASFB. Some started as young as three. "At that age, they're learning ballet in more creative, playful way," Dorskocil explains. "When they're about eight, they start more formal training."



Young dancers in *Sleeping Beauty*; photo by Michael Alvarez.



Aspen Santa Fe Ballet School; photo by Rosalie O'Connor.

Graduating from a soft ballet slipper to pointe shoes marks a major milestone in a ballerina's development. For local kids, that rite of passage usually entails a trip to Colorado Springs to see Noel Amend, who has fitted many ASFB students with their first pointe shoes. Around 11 years old, ASFB faculty evaluate each ballerina individually, looking at criteria that include ankle mobility and strength, turnout, leg strength, and core strength to determine whether she's ready to make her first, tentative relevé onto the tip of hard, satin shoes and to advance into pointe classes.

Most ASFB students "train year-round from the get-go, and once they're on pointe, they train a minimum of three days a week," Dorskocil says, "You may have heard that it takes 10,000 hours to become expert at something?"

That 10,000-hour figure comes from Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 book *Outliers*. Gladwell found that geniuses aren't just born; world-class performance is achieved through hard work, practice, and apprenticeship, work that's often made possible by parents and community members who open doors. Gladwell found the 10,000-hour figure "extraordinarily consistent" in fields ranging from ice hockey and computer programming to rock and roll.

To train the school's advanced divisions, Dorskocil draws on more than 20 years of professional dance and teaching experience. Before performing with Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, she danced for the Oakland Ballet, Ballet Arizona, and Nevada Ballet Theatre. Dorskocil, who lives in Basalt, has directed the School of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet since 2004. Six other dancers make up the local faculty, and ASFB company members also occasionally teach at the school.

En route to 10,000 hours of practice, aspiring ballet students invest years of blood, sweat, and tears into their discipline. Blisters, sprains, strains, bruises, and overcoming embarrassment are all part of the experience. At ASFB, even students who dance only *recreationally* typically practice five days a week. For students who aspire to perform professionally, ASFB sponsors summer intensive programs that call for them to dance eight hours a day for six days a week!

Such demands explain why ballet not only requires physical strength, flexibility, and technique, it also demands resilience. "Anyone who learns a classical art form builds character," Dorskocil observes. "Our main focus is to teach great character strength. Ballet teaches kids to have growth mindset, to set goals. A young dancer learns stick-to-it-iveness. Teamwork. A work ethic. To take care of one's body, physically and nutritionally. They learn about self-discipline, self-respect, and to respect



Photo by Rosalie O'Connor.



Young performer David Gabriel dancing; photo by Michael Alvarez.



The Mouse King from the Nutcracker Ballet; photo by Michael Alvarez.

each other. There is so much they learn from it!"

This month, ASFB's young dancers are heading back to the barre with ballet classes at ASFB's studios in Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, Basalt, and Aspen. Many are getting ready to participate in Aspen Santa Fe Ballet's professional production of *The Nutcracker*, which takes place in December.

Is there a pipsqueak in your house who dreams of dancing? If so, The School of Aspen Santa Fe Ballet can help her or him take the first steps to becoming a little squeaker in the Mouse King's troupe—or someday, even dancing as the Nutcracker Prince or Clara. This would be a good time to contact the School of ASFB's Director Melanie Dorskocil; phone 970.925.7175, ext. 106, or email Melanie@AspenSantaFeBallet.com. For additional information, visit ASFB's website: AspenSantaFeBallet.com.