

Being a black dancer hasn't always been easy, especially when you are one of the few in your studio. However, the tenacity, courage, and strength that I have developed during my time as a dancer have prepared me thoroughly for the next phase of my life.

From the moment I was born, dance has been my world. My sister has been dancing since she was two, and seeing her shine in the studio, always inspired me to do the same. I have danced at Michelle Ferraro's Dance USA for 15 years now, committing to something and sticking to it - regardless of the challenges is one of the most important lessons life teaches us. Growing up in the studio, you are taught many styles of dance. Similar to dance, there are all different kinds of beautiful people in the world who deserve to be loved and embraced.

Being black in America has taught me these same lessons as well. As time has gone on, I always hoped to see more students of color in the studio, because representation is so important. Over the past 8 years of competing, I have tried all styles of dance. However, if you asked me to pick, tap and jazz are my absolute favorites. I was lucky enough to earn my first solo at age 9, which was tap. Three years after doing tap solos, I started competing for the jazz solo category. I wasn't the best at first, but with hard work and dedication eventually, it came to me more naturally. Now, I compete in the solo category for jazz and tap every year. Starting my freshman year of high school, I had the opportunity to compete in a tap duet with my best friend. I couldn't imagine myself sharing the stage with anyone else. The bond between us has grown over the years and I know will last forever. I've been awarded so many scholarships and overall awards since I started competing. My director saw so much potential in me and always believed in me. It just took me a little more time to gain that same confidence in my abilities.

There was no easy way to surpass some of my struggles being a black dancer. In my age group, I was the only one. I was lucky that my older sister and cousins danced with me, seeing their black skin shine on the dance floor with me meant everything to me. We had to be each other's support system. When it did come time to compete, our hair was a conversation starter for sure. It is obvious that being African American we have a unique hair texture. I am and never will be ashamed but when others make certain comments, they become hurtful. Although we might be able to style our hair the same way, it is not easy. I cannot wash my hair every other day, hop out the shower, and throw my hair in a ponytail with some hairspray to go to dance. But I will wash my hair, have my mom braid it up, and it will last for 1-2 weeks. It's differences like these that make us unique in our own light.

Finally, after many years, some of my teammates took the time to correctly ask questions about my hair and educated themselves rather than them putting me down. The amount of compliments I get now is astronomical as I look back at how it started.

I've dedicated my life to dance and with the commitment comes sacrifices. This often included being in the studio seven days a week with minimal breaks. My dedication to this sport has allowed me to share my gifts with others like myself. That's why I not only dance but teach dance so students can see parts of themselves in me. I earned the opportunity to assist and teach dancers ages 4-12.

I was shocked when my director first asked if I was interested, but I knew she trusted me and all I needed was a little faith in myself. Going on my second year of teaching I continue to influence many young dancers. More specifically the ones who had gone through the same struggles as myself.

The dance community has grown in its commitment to equality and that is something I am extremely proud of. I have students coming up to me saying "We look alike," or "I want to be a dancer like you when I get bigger," and those are the moments I absolutely live for. I've been given the opportunity to express my love for dance and all that it teaches. Being a black dancer has had the biggest and most positive influence on my life. I'm committed to being there for black students every step of the way, and most importantly through their struggles and successes.