



# NSAL National Newsletter

Spring 2017



## President's Message



Seven months have passed since my last newsletter. It seems like only yesterday that we were leaving Phoenix after the musical theatre competition, but in only three short weeks, we will be arriving in Boca for the classical ballet competition. I am happy to report that we will have 17 competitors—14 female and 3 male. We are hoping for a record turnout for this very special meeting. There is still time to register and be part of the excitement.

As the host chapter, Florida East Coast will have many members in attendance, but for those coming from the other 16 chapters, which chapter will have the most members in attendance? And which chapter will have the largest number of first-time attendees? We shall see!

Last September, on my way to North Carolina, I stopped at the University of Kentucky in Lexington, to visit the archives where we have been storing our documents since the Library of Congress stopped accepting them. We have been asked to gift them to the library. The Executive Board voted to do that, so I have signed the Deed of Gift. On my way home from Boca I will stop at the university again, and Historian Sarah Moore and I will remove what they do not wish to archive.

In February, Doni Lystra, Anne Lauder and I visited the Florida East Coast Chapter. We attended a meeting of the PR committee and a high tea on February 10. From there we returned to Clearwater and, on the 12th, met with about 10 members of the Clearwater/Tampa Bay Chapter. At both of those meetings, there was much discussion about the future of NSAL and the path we must take to move forward in today's society. Cont. on next page..

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## **A Gentle Reminder**

### **Board Members and Presidents:**

Please remember that we need a digital copy of your report for the meeting in Boca. Presidents, you may take your report to Boca, but, ultimately, we will need a digital copy of it, which you may send to me and to Anne Lauder. All other reports should be sent to me. Thanks for making our job easier by sending your report soon.

Judith Park

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Anne Lauder

<ALauder@tampabay.rr.com>

On April 9th, I attended the Bloomington Chapter's 2017 Showcase. The performers were the winners of the competitions that the chapter holds every year in all of the categories that NSAL supports. The afternoon was an absolute delight and some of the performances were truly awe-inspiring. I returned there again for their Red Rose luncheon on April 30 which honored NSAL member George Pinney, who is retiring from Indiana University after thirty years of teaching drama and musical theatre.

I would be happy to visit all of the chapters to see how you are furthering the mission of NSAL. If you would like me to visit, please send me your meeting schedule for the coming year. I will try to work my travels around your meeting dates.

There are some exciting new offerings to add to what NSAL does for young artists, and we have received a most generous bequest from a former honorary member of the Virginia/North Carolina Chapter. You can read about each one of these in the separate articles in this newsletter.

I look forward to greeting many of you in Boca in June. Please come and help us shape the future of NSAL. The young artists of tomorrow are counting on us!

Judy Park

National President

## **NSAL Partners with The School of the Art Institute of Chicago**

A number of years ago, NSAL was the recipient of two bequests for Visual Arts from Kathy Morgan Lee and Audrey Peery, so the decision to remove Visual Arts from the NSAL rotation created the problem of how to use those funds. Several ideas were proposed. The one approved by the Executive Board seemed to offer the benefit of getting our name out to a larger audience without causing any more work for the chapters. Doni Lsytra made the initial contact with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago to propose a partnership with them. It has taken quite a lot of work on Doni's part, but we now have two scholarships set in place that we hope will be picked up for this summer.

Beginning in Summer 2017, NSAL will sponsor two students, between the ages of 23 and 30; one student to attend two one-week summer intensives

(Kathy Morgan Lee Scholarship); and one student to attend a one-week summer intensive (Audrey Peery Scholarship). The earned income from the funds will be used.

Every year SAIC receives several hundred applications from across the US and abroad. The scholarships will be promoted on the SAIC website as well as on the NSAL website. The SAIC website will link to the NSAL site for full details, course selections, etc. In mid-April, the chair will receive the applications with the following requirements: five images of recent art or design work; statement of interest (300 words or less); scholarship form; housing application form (optional); tuition repayment agreement.

**Continued on next page...**

**NSAL-SAIC Kathy Morgan Lee Scholarship  
\$3000**

Founded in 1944, the mission of the National Society of Arts and Letters (NSAL) is to assist promising young artists through competitions, financial assistance, master classes, mentoring, and providing career opportunities. The NSAL-SAIC Kathy Morgan Lee Scholarship is a merit-based fund that covers tuition, campus housing, travel, meals, supplies, and incidentals for one student enrolled in two Adult Continuing Education one-week summer intensives. To be eligible, applicants must be between the ages of 23 and 30. The program runs from July 31 through August 11.

**NSAL-SAIC Audrey Peery Scholarship  
\$1000**

Founded in 1944, the mission of the National Soci-

ety of Arts and Letters (NSAL) is to assist promising young artists through competitions, financial assistance, master classes, mentoring, and providing career opportunities. The NSAL-SAIC Audrey Peery Scholarship is a merit-based fund that covers tuition, transportation, meals, supplies, and incidentals for one student enrolled in one Adult Continuing Education one-week summer intensive. To be eligible, applicants must be between the age of 23 and 30 and a resident of Metropolitan Chicago.

If you know of any artists who would qualify for either of these awards, please direct them to the NSAL website or that of SAIC.

**Kudos to Doni Lystra!**

**DEREK OPPEN BEQUEST**

On March 23rd, I received an email from Alicia Bond, the niece of Derek Oppen, who serves as Executrix of his estate. Derek Oppen is a former honorary member of the Virginia/North Carolina Chapter. Alicia informed me that her uncle, who passed away on January 15th, had bequeathed a fund to NSAL. Previously, Mr. Oppen had given a generous contribution to the Virginia/North Carolina Chapter for two annual awards, one in his mother's name, Ms. Hermine Jean Oppen, and one in the name of a friend, Ms. Holly Semple.

Derek Oppen also had a conversation and shared several emails with Sheila Summers, who served as administrator of NSAL National for many years in the Washington D.C. office, about making a later

contribution to NSAL National. What he gifted NSAL was the money he had invested in a Vanguard fund. I asked Doni Lystra, treasurer for the Board of Trustees, to contact Vanguard to make the transfer of funds to NSAL. The value of the account is approximately \$270,000.00, which makes it, after the Nicholson-Nielsen Trust Fund and the Winston Funds, NSAL's third largest fund.

Mr. Oppen's commitment to NSAL, and his support of our mission, was obviously very strong and his generous gift is greatly appreciated. We will make every effort to insure that his contribution is used in a manner of which he would approve. This topic will be on the agenda for discussion at the Board of Trustees meeting in Boca Raton in May.

Derek Charles Oppen passed away in Charlottesville on January 15, 2017. Derek was born on November 1, 1948, in Montreal, Canada. He obtained an undergraduate degree from Bishop's University, a PhD from University of Toronto (1975) and an MBA from Stanford University (1983). He was a senior researcher at Stanford University (1975-1980), and a consultant for clients such as MIT, IBM, and Xerox, concluding his career as Vice-President at Nortel. His seminal work for computer science, the Nelson-Oppen method, is still in use today. After retirement, he moved to Ivy and purchased a farm in Orange County where he grew heritage trees and organic produce, taking a special interest in rare tomato species. He had a lifelong love of classical, jazz and bluegrass music. An accomplished piano player, he treated friends to amazing concerts on one of his Steinway pianos. His three border collies were his constant companions and he enjoyed fostering needy animals. He is greatly missed by many friends, his sister, Barbara Francis (David); nieces, Alicia Bond (Matt), Christina Walden (Mike), and Barbara Thomas (David), and nine great nieces and nephews. If you wish to honor Derek with a donation, his recommendation would be Glen Highland Farm, 217 Pegg Road, Morris, NY 13808.



## Extra Support for Former Winston Scholarship Recipients

The question has often been asked if we have funds to help former Winston Scholarship recipients. Unfortunately, the answer has always been that we do not. We recently became aware of the fact that some of the Winston recipients never used the money awarded to them. That money will be put into a fund and made available for the kind of additional support that we give to our former competition winners.

You can read the letter that Mary Catherine Wright sent to Tom Jones seeking additional help to attend a program in Chicago this summer. Mary Catherine's Winston application was put forth by the Kentucky Chapter, so we appealed to them for some help. They were able to provide \$500 and from the unused Winston funds, we gave her \$1,000. Mary Catherine will attend the program. I plan to meet her when she is in Chicago and, if possible, to attend the performance of the opera in which she will perform. With this helping hand, NSAL has taken a small step forward—one which we hope will allow Mary Catherine to take a much larger step forward in what promises to be a very successful career.

### NSAL and Facebook

NSAL now has a Facebook account. We will be posting items of general interest and sharing the success stories about our young winners and scholarship recipients with you. Chapter Presidents, if you have news to share, you can post it there as well. Let us know what new and exciting things you are doing in your chapter. We can all benefit from new ideas. Those of you who are well acquainted with Facebook, please help out your members who are not. Encourage your former contestants, whether they were national winners or not, to keep us up to date with information on their careers as well.

**Don't forget to LIKE us on our Facebook page!**

This is Mary Catherine Wright and I was the recipient of the 2015 NSAL Winston Vocal Scholarship. With this generous award I attended a summer program in Prague and performed the role of Zerlina in the Estates Theatre directed by Sherill Milnes and Maria Zouves. I also performed solos in concerts and galas throughout Prague. I am so grateful for the financial help, as it helped push me forward in my career and gave me the opportunity to make great connections and experiences.

Since winning the scholarship, I won the Metropolitan National Council Auditions in Lexington, KY and moved on to the regional finals in Memphis, TN at the age of 21. Now 22, I have been singing with my first professional opera chorus at Kentucky Opera, travelling back and forth from class to Louisville to sing in *Madame Butterfly* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Last month, I graduated summa cum laude from the University of Kentucky with my Bachelors in Voice Performance and a Certificate in Musical Theatre.

I recently completed my first official audition season, where I was invited to attend a summer program in Chicago—the Summer Opera Training Program. At this program, I will sing the Second Woman in *Dido and Aeneas*, cover Servilia in *La clemenza di Tito*. Here I will receive multiple coachings, voice lessons, diction classes, attend and participate in masterclasses, and much more. Tuition cost is \$2,350, not including living expenses and housing in Chicago for a month. I have been working as an Administrative Officer at a local college advising business and saving up money, but audition season has really had its affect on me financially. I have put down a tuition deposit of \$350 and have almost \$1,000 saved up for tuition, housing, and living expenses when in Chicago.

I noticed from our last correspondence in July 2015 that if I needed any help, I should reach out. I would love to be able to seize this opportunity, but I need a little extra financial help to make this opportunity a reality. With whom could I speak about this? Is there anything you need from me?

Please let me know how I could best be of service to you.

Thank you again for the generous scholarship in 2015 and thank you for all that this foundation does for young singers and performers around the world. At a time like this, it is such a blessing. I hope to hear from you very soon.

Sincerely,  
Mary Catherine Wright

### Who Are Your Delegates?

Chapter Presidents, please send your delegate list to Judy Park: <tlaloc31@comcast.net> & Shari Upbin: <shariupbin@gmail.com>

## 2017 Naomi Rabb Winston Art Scholarship Recipients

**Cassidy Boyuk**, 18, Ohio River Valley Chapter, \$2,000 to continue an apprenticeship in classical realism painting with Michael Cooley at Cooley Studios in Worthington, OH

**Jackson Casady**, 22, Virginia/North Carolina Chapter, \$1,000 for a summer studio program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA

**Suzanne Head**, 22, Ohio River Valley Chapter, \$1,250 for workshops in glass painting and casting at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, NY, in preparation for a 9-month residency in glass studies

**Matthew Hennessey**, 20, Clearwater/Tampa Bay Chapter, \$1,000 for expanded studies in screen printing, mono printing, flocking and collage

**Jefferson McCarthy**, 18, Florida East Coast Chapter, \$1,000 for studies at the International Center of Photography in New York City

**Mai-Han Nguyen**, 18, Washington, D.C. Chapter, \$1,050 for the pre-college student residency program offered by the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, MD

**Maggie O'Keefe**, 19, New Jersey Chapter, \$1,000 to take part in an artist residency program at the Visual Arts at Chautauqua Institution in Chautauqua, NY, and courses in painting, drawing and printmaking at the Art Students League in New York City

**Emmelyn Redd**, 17, Greater Arizona Chapter, \$1,200 toward tuition costs to attend the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, UT

**Khalif Thompson**, 21, Greater New York Chapter, \$1,500 to study watercolor painting with the distinguished artist Frederick Brosen at the Art Students League in New York City

**Savannah Wade**, 18, Washington, D.C. Chapter, \$1,000 toward New York City's School of Visual Arts summer painting program in Barcelona, Spain, that gives 3 undergraduate studio credits

## 2017 Shirley Rabb Winston Voice Scholarship Recipients

**Elena Stalnaker**, 17, from the Bloomington Chapter, awarded \$2,000. She plans to use her scholarship to attend a summer voice program at Brevard Music Center. Elena will perform at the NSAL Annual Meeting in Boca Raton, FL, June 1.

**Sarah Nalty**, 18, from the Washington DC Chapter, awarded \$2,000. She will attend either Little Patuxent Opera Institute or Boston Summer Program.

**Sarah Aaldering**, 17, from the Greater Phoenix Chapter, awarded \$1,500. Oberlin in Italy or Chautauqua will partly be paid by the scholarship.

**Madeline Whitesell**, 22, from the Central Illinois Chapter, awarded \$1,500. The scholarship will be used for private voice lessons with Cynthia Hayman-Coleman and coaching with Susanna Lemberskaya.

**Giana Gagliardotto**, 17, from the Clearwater/Tampa Chapter, awarded \$1,000. Scholarship will go toward a summer voice program, possibly Boston.

**Isabelle Scott**, 17, from the Florida East Coast Chapter, \$1,000. She will have intensive voice training with Marilyn Mims paid by the scholarship.

**Lydia Graham**, 18, from the Kentucky Chapter, \$1,000. She will use the scholarship toward the Chautauqua Institution Voice Program this summer.

**Austin Cripe**, 22, from the Clearwater/Tampa Chapter, \$1,000. The scholarship will be used toward study at the Brevard Opera Program.

**David Davani**, 22, from the Greater New York Chapter, \$1,000. He plans to use the scholarship for voice lessons and coaching.

## Dorothy Lincoln-Smith Classical Voice Competition

1st Place:	<b>Calvin Griffin</b>	Little Rock
2nd Place:	<b>Andrés Acosta</b>	Bloomington
3rd Place:	<b>Zaray Rodríguez</b>	Florida East Coast

We all look forward to meeting some of these scholarship recipients and competition winners in Boca. Elena Stalnaker will sing at the Presidents' Luncheon. Unfortunately, Cassidy Boyuk will not be present, but she is preparing a video that we will be able to view at the luncheon. Chris Cosdon will show some of the work of the other young visual artists as well. As for the Dorothy Lincoln-Smith winners, Calvin Griffin will be in New York at Glimmerglass, and Andrés Acosta will be in San Francisco in the Merola program. If you wish to hear their magnificent voices, you can look for them on YouTube. At the Bloomington Showcase, Andrés Acosta was scheduled to sing. He was flying in from Florida where he had gone for another competition the day before. Delta Airlines dealt us a heavy blow when they cancelled his flight. So, thanks to technology and the fast thinking of Ruth Albright, we were able to see and hear Andrés via one of his YouTube performances. We will be fortunate to hear Zaray Rodríguez sing at the Red Rose Gala. Surely we will be the recipients of some wonderful visual and musical offerings from these young people, the young musicians that the Florida East Coast Chapter will present and our seventeen ballet competitors. You won't want to miss this opportunity!

## Where Did They Go from Here?

It is always nice to know about all of the wonderful things that the young artists we have supported have gone on to do. Sometimes we find out about them from the internet or Facebook, and sometimes they write to us directly or come back to visit and let us know what they are doing. Gail Van Zanten and Denna Shiben try to keep up with our former winners, but if you have any special information that you would like all of us to know, please pass it on for future publication. I have selected a few of our former winners to highlight this time. There are many more to choose from in the future.

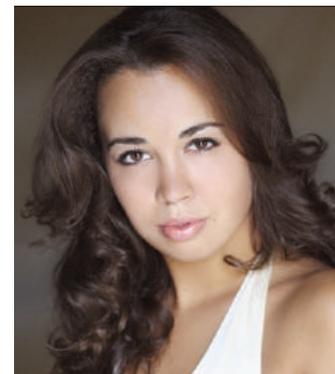
If you are an opera lover and happen to have listened to the Metropolitan Opera's broadcast of *Idomeneo* several weeks ago, you will have heard **Nadine Sierra** sing the role of Ilia. (Soprano Nadine Sierra sings "with expressivity and tenderness" (*New York Times*) as Ilia.) Nadine was NSAL's 2nd place winner in our last voice competition in Bloomington in 2008. In 2007 and 2009 respectively, Sierra became the youngest winner to date of both the Marilyn Horne Foundation Vocal Competition and the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. *The San Francisco Chronicle* wrote: "There was no way to listen to soprano Nadine Sierra...and feel anything but awe and delight—a combination of admiration for her current gifts and eager anticipation at what the future surely holds for her." Nadine will be singing in the suburbs of Chicago at the Ravinia Festival this summer. I have marked my calendar to attend that event. If you happen to be in Chicago on Tuesday, August 8th, you can hear Nadine sing *The Creation* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Maestro James Levine.

Only a few weeks ago, Nadine was named as the winner of the 2017 Richard Tucker Award. Announced by the Richard Tucker Music Foundation, the award—one of the industry's most prestigious recognitions for up-and-coming artists and also one of the most prescient in identifying singers on the verge of stardom—carries a \$50,000 cash prize. Conferred annually by a panel of industry professionals on an American singer deemed to be on the threshold of a major international career, the Tucker Award has gone to singers that have included Renée Fleming, Stephanie Blythe, Lawrence

Brownlee, Matthew Polenzani (who will be singing *The Creation* at Ravinia this summer with Nadine) & Christine Goerke. The twenty-eight-year-old Sierra will formally receive the award at the Richard Tucker Music Foundation's annual Gala, which will be held on Sunday, December 10 at Carnegie Hall.

"I cannot thank the Richard Tucker Music Foundation enough for this incredible honor and for all the support they've shown me since I first auditioned for a Sara Tucker Study Grant in 2010," said Sierra, who is currently in Venice preparing to sing the title role in performances of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Teatro la Fenice. "I am humbled to receive this award and to follow in the very large footsteps of those who have preceded me."

"We are elated to have Nadine as our 2017 Richard Tucker Award winner," said Barry Tucker, president of the Richard Tucker Music Foundation and son of the Brooklyn-born tenor. "Having known her since she was an undergraduate in college and been in awe of her talents even back then, I could not be more impressed by how she has developed as a singer. She possesses an artistic maturity that is well beyond her years and is destined to be a leading light of the opera world."



**Jonathan Majors** (2015 Drama 1st Place, Chautauqua Chapter) graduated from Yale and went to New York. He shot and starred in Gus Van Sant's and Dustin Lance Black's ABC mini-series *When We Rise* which premiered in January of 2017 on ABC prime-time. He then booked and shot a film directed by Scott Cooper, writer and director of *Crazy Heart*, the film for which actor Jeff Bridges received his academy award acting opposite academy award winner Christian Bate and academy award nominee Rosemund Pike. His next film began in January, a film called *Anima* acting in a supporting lead with actor Michael Shannon.



On stage and behind the scenes, **Ian Martin** (2015 Drama Honorable Mention, Bloomington Chapter) is taking Chicago theater by storm (By Jennifer Garrett)

Whether he's working with an improvisation troupe, performing *Macbeth* at IU, or acting in his first Chicago production, for Ian Martin, B.A. '16, "every performance is different." But each performance offers an opportunity to connect with the audience. "It's all about empathy," he says. "Today, more than ever, when there are so many differences, so many lines being drawn in the sand, that chance to reach across is a paramount opportunity, and I think that's why I do it."

Ian recently starred in the play *Truth and Reconciliation* with Sideshow Theatre Company in Chicago. A graduate of Indiana University's Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance, Martin is just one of the incredible alumni we celebrate this IU Day. His talented performance as Macbeth was featured in one of the College of Arts and Sciences' recent short films, but his work at IU has reached beyond the campus—all the way to the Chicago theater scene. Together with eight of his theater

colleagues, Martin developed a student-run fellowship and training program at IU that culminated in a showcase in Chicago. "I got the audition for the show that I'm in now because of that showcase."

Ian went with me to Bloomington for the April 30 Red Rose luncheon to honor NSAL member George Pinney on his retirement from IU. During our drive we talked a lot about NSAL and its need for younger members. Ian will join the new Chicago Chapter, which we hope to have up and running very soon. He plans to try to attract other young members, so that we can support many aspiring young artists long into the future.



My reason for attending the Red Rose luncheon was to join in the farewell celebration for NSAL member George Pinney who is retiring from IU after thirty years. George was the Career Awards Chair of the first two Musical Theatre competitions we held in 2004 and 2012. Both the Bloomington Chapter and the Drama Department of the university went all out to make this farewell special. Many of George's former students came back to pay tribute to him. Among them was **Taylor Crousore**, a former two-time Bloomington Chapter NSAL winner, who was especially thankful for his association with George and with NSAL. Now working in New York, Taylor stepped onto the stage as Professor Harold Hill, of *Music Man* fame. He wrote lyrics about George to music from *The Music Man* and there was trouble in River City once again, in the form of George's retirement. It was so clever and so well done—a true testimony to the affection and esteem which Taylor and the other students feel for George.

Ruth Albright wrote Taylor a thank you note for having come in from New York to perform. What

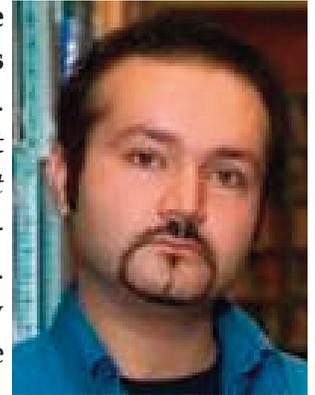
follows was his response: “Your sweet and kind words mean so much to me. We had an amazing week back in Bloomington. To be able to surprise George and perform for him and all of you was a treat. It was a trip back home I will hold near and dear to me. I am so glad to have gotten the time with you that I did. Having people like you in my life, supporting me and cheering me on, is what keeps me going. This trip was good for me in that sense. It can get lonely out there, and sometimes you feel like you’ve gone astray. You ask yourself what are you doing. You question so much. But after being back in Bloomington, my head is clear. I feel more motivated. The love and support I got from you and everyone else I was with last week will carry me a long, long way. I cannot thank you enough for that. Please keep supporting these students like you have me. It means the world to them to have that kind of support. You make such a difference in our lives by extending the one thing we all strive for...love.”



If ever you question why you belong to NSAL and why you continue to support young artists, there is your answer. I had the opportunity to speak with Taylor during the reception. He told me that he played Professor Harold Hill last year. One evening, Robert Preston’s nephew was in the audience. After the performance he said to Taylor, “Uncle Bob would have been proud.”

Because I mentioned Ian Martin, who plans to become a member of NSAL, I want to mention **Mehdi Okasi** as well. Mehdi is already a member of the Metropolitan New York Chapter. He was the 1st place national winner of the last Literature competition held in Clearwater, FL in 2010. Mehdi represented the Bloomington Chapter, but he is now living in New York, is an assistant professor of creative writing at SUNY-Purchase. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Best New American*

*Voices 2009, Glimmer Train, The Iowa Review, and the Los Angeles Review of Books, among other places. Mehdi is the recipient of grants and fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, The Studios of Key West, and The National Society of Arts and Letters among others. He is at work on his first novel, *May This Be Your Last Sorrow*. We will all look forward to its publication. Mehdi, please let us know when it becomes available for us to read.*



An excerpt from “The Hate.”

While my mother saved me from fighting in one war, I’ve witnessed many others from the safety of America’s east coast: The Gulf War, Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan, and in the summer of 1995, when my mother and I finally returned to Iran for the first time in twelve years, thousands of Muslims were being slaughtered in Bosnia. My teenage years were marked by primetime broadcasts of smoldering buildings, men wielding Kalashnikovs, tanks hunkering down narrow streets, bodies bloodying sidewalks, robin blue UN helmets, and children, many children, lost or orphaned or abandoned, staring saucer-wide into the lens of a camera. “I would never have let you become a soldier,” my mother said to me in those years, recalling how we’d fled the eight-year war with Iraq. “They don’t know the meaning of being a son.” But those years of global violence were only a distant landscape, one that I could switch off with a remote. Living in a suburb of Boston, my life was otherwise occupied with college. And while it was a time of great sorrow, I didn’t feel it as such until we returned to Iran that June, and I saw two boys hang.

Many of our former winners stay in touch with the chapter that sponsored them. If you have information worth sharing about your former winners, please send it to me for the next newsletter. We all like to read their success stories!

## The Ballet Corner



Ballerina Misty Copeland has been in the news quite a bit in the last three or four years. A couple of new books by or about her have recently been released. Last fall, in preparation for the En Pointe competition, I read *Life in Motion*, “a story of passion and grace for anyone who has dared to dream of a different life.” If you want to learn more about what it is like to have the desire and the drive to overcome many obstacles, you might want to take a trip to your local library prior to the competition in Boca. I have included some passages from the book that may whet your appetite.



I had started the season by seeing my face on a banner, rustling in the breeze as it hung in front of the Met. For a moment, I, a black woman, was the face of ABT. Then, during my premiere performance in New York, the audience was filled with luminaries, the legends of black ballet, who deserved the applause that I received on their behalf. It was amazing.

Now this.

Having to sit out the season, the season in which I had been the Firebird and Gamzatti, was too much to bear. It felt as if everything that truly mattered to me in my life was gone.

...

I put my heartache to paper.

“I just don’t know how much stronger I can be and for how much longer,” I confessed in my diary. I’d worked with integrity, pushing myself at a pace that sometimes felt impossible to maintain, and finally gotten a break. “I’m grateful for what I do have, but sad that it’s not enough,” I wrote in my journal. “God, when will it ever be easy?”

OF COURSE, IT WILL never be easy.

In life, like in ballet, you have to find your balance. To push yourself as far as you can go, but know when to pull back from the brink—of injury, of despair. I wanted to run away, but where would I go? How could I go?

I wanted to be an inspiration, but I also wanted so much more. I wanted to be a prima ballerina.

I know that I just didn’t have it in me to give up, even if I sometimes felt like a fool for continuing to believe.

... As I always say, there is no shortcut in ballet technique. You repeat and repeat to get whatever you are trying to master to become second nature, for it to become as instinctive as walking. Then you can start to run.

I’m finally running.

I can more easily dismiss critiques when I know I have achieved visible improvement in whatever move or step I’ve attempted to fine-tune. I know at that point that I’ve done what I can do, and I simply can’t please everyone. It is

enough for me to make my best effort at achieving the perfection that is nearly impossible to attain, but that is ever the goal of a professional ballerina.

BEFORE PULLING OUT OF the Met season, and throughout my recovery, I was able to take advantage of the many amazing opportunities that have come my way beyond ABT’s stage. I shot a calendar that celebrated ballet, with the wonderful photographer, Gregg Delman. I became one of several athletes and artists featured in a series of commercials for Diet Dr. Pepper. I have continued to hold master classes for budding ballerinas, and I’m an ambassador for the Boys and Girls Club, my other childhood home.

My extracurricular endeavors, beyond ballet or ABT, have been misunderstood by some. I also know that there are many within the ballet world who do not approve of my mainstream appeal to underprivileged communities. Like the blogger who spoke negatively about my performances with Prince, as well as some of my other endeavors, I get criticized for “letting people in.” It’s almost as if ballet is the exclusive secret society that’s terrified of change, even as it constantly looks for a way to stay relevant and alive. But I want everyone to feel that they could be a part of my world, if they want to be.

My goal has been to share ballet with an audience that might otherwise not know or appreciate it. Of course, not every budding dancer will be fortunate enough to have a Liz Cantine as her drill instructor, spotting her potential, or a Cindy who takes her expertise to a working-class neighborhood, then offers a free education to the most ambitious talents. But that doesn’t mean we can’t make a start. Recently, I helped the founding of ABT’s Project Plié, a partnership between the company and the Boys and Girls Clubs of America that will formalize the process that introduced me to ballet, bringing ABT-trained teachers to clubs across the country to scout for talented kids who might otherwise never set foot on a stage. They’ll learn history and dance theory, and be provided with scholarships to hone their talents. And as the figurehead of the program, I’ll get to embody the incredible

symbolism that being different can stand for. I am different and I accept that. I'm aware of the power that it holds in opening doors for others who are underprivileged or unrepresented—it's a power that goes far beyond me or any of my individual achievements.

I am not just trying to shepherd and mentor new dancers. I also feel deeply that there is a huge, untapped audience of ballet viewers. And among disadvantaged children, or children of color who are often not exposed to this art form, I believe that ballet provides much to learn. Studies show that dancers have a very high rate of success in any endeavor they pursue because of the discipline, both physical and mental, that they must develop practicing their craft. Those are valuable attributes for anyone to possess. But children cannot develop them if they are not exposed to dance. I am willing to carry that message and pass on those lessons even as I realize I may not see immediate change in my lifetime.

But when all is said and done, it is standing on the stage, articulating ballet's majesty, that is and has always been my first and strongest love.

#### I LOVE THAT IMAGE of the Firebird.

It exemplifies the most joyful moments in the life of a dancer. The exhilaration of performance, the ecstasy of losing yourself in movement. But those moments are fleeting. In between there are hours of grueling practice, and days, weeks, even months of despair when injuries or other problems keep you from performing your best. Or from dancing at all.

When I was recuperating from my shin injury, I had a great deal of time for reflection. I often contemplated whether or not I would—or should—dance again. Did I have a different path and purpose going forward? Perhaps I had gone as far as I could, and from now on, my role would be to encourage and inspire as a mentor rather than as a dancer.

But now that I'm back onstage, having grown in ways I didn't realize were possible, I know that I'm here to do both.



*Dancing is the loftiest, the most moving, the most beautiful of the arts, because it is not mere translation or abstraction from life; it is life itself.*

*Havelock Ellis*



No matter how many hours I devote to practice, no matter how much of my life I give to ballet, the work never stops. Every dancer knows that there will always be someone younger and better waiting in the wings to take her place. The older you get, the less you are physically capable of. Yet age and experience give your art depth and complexity, and I am so excited to continue to grow and explore. It's all about finding that balance.

I still worry, far more than I should, about what the ballet world thinks of me—whether I will ever be accepted and seen as the talent I was once praised for as a prodigy, a well-rounded artist deserving of respect. Or will I forever be “the black ballerina,” an oddity who doesn't quite compare?

But in my moments of clarity I envision all those people whose lives have been touched by my story and my accomplishments so far, who upon seeing my journey know that you can start late, look different, be uncertain, and still succeed.

My fears are that it could be another two decades before another black woman is in the position that I hold with an elite ballet company. That if I don't rise to principal, people will feel I have failed them.

I still want it. To be a principal dancer with ABT, to be Nikiya in *Là Bayadère*, Juliet to a soaring Romeo, Odette and Odile in *Swan Lake*, and *Giselle*. But whether or not I become the first female African American principal dancer in an elite company, I know that I've had an impact by having a voice and sharing my story.

There's another image of the Firebird that I love: how she emerges triumphant, and then soars into the sky, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

I've come so far from that first class I took in my baggy gym clothes. I know that by being here, for seventeen years, in this rarefied, difficult, elitist, beautiful world, I have made my mark in history and ballet. I will forever fight, performing as if it's my last show.

And I will love every minute of it.