



# LEAPING *into the* SPOTLIGHT

*Kitchener dancer Heather Lehan's career gains momentum  
as she prepares for European auditions*

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*“For me, dance is telling a story. It’s an amazing escape and a chance to focus on the moment and let the other stuff go.”*

HEATHER LEHAN

Heather Lehan has parlayed her love of music, her athletic ability and her emotional sensibilities into a single art form. And her career as a dancer took a huge leap forward when she won the Christopher Ondaatje Ballet Prize from the National Ballet School in Toronto.

The honour, presented when she graduated last spring, comes with a \$25,000 purse, money the 18-year-old Kitchener dancer is using to travel through Europe, attending workshops and auditioning for professional dance companies.

Her teacher, Ana Jojic-Begovic, says Lehan was selected because she’s a beautiful dancer, a hard-working student, and she’s open to trying new things.

“At our spring showcase in May (2016), you couldn’t take your eyes off her,” Jojic-Begovic recalls in a telephone interview from Germany, where she recently moved. “She was just shining on the stage. She makes it look easy and natural.”

For her part, Lehan describes dance not as a challenge, but rather as a release.

“For me, dance is telling a story,” she says. “It’s an amazing escape and a chance to focus on the moment and let the other stuff go. I find it therapeutic.”

If you think you recognize Lehan’s name, it could be from frequent mentions in the sports section of the Waterloo Regional Record, where she was often on the list of cross-country winners, rep soccer goal scorers and downhill skiing finishers. As a

child, she also took swimming and piano lessons, as well as dance classes.

“It was busy, but I don’t like to be bored,” Lehan says. “I loved doing all those things, but over the years I had to let things go. And I always liked dance best. My closest friends are there. We’re still connected.”

Something really clicked for her in the dance studio, where she followed in her sisters’ footsteps, taking jazz, tap, ballet and acro at the Morée School of Dance.

Cora Black, owner of the Waterloo dance studio, taught Lehan and her sisters for at least a decade. Black says Heather didn’t stand out in the beginning – she was just like the other three- and four-year-olds learning to follow direction and basic dance moves.



Heather Lehan was photographed at the National Ballet School in Toronto, where she recently graduated with high honours.





“She was quite shy in the beginning,” Black recalls. “She always had great facility for dance, but she really started to blossom in Grade 5 and 6.

“The special thing about Heather is her personality. She is such a bright light, you know. She’s very driven, she pushes herself hard, but she’s so friendly and unselfish. It’s a rare mix in this profession.”

As Heather got older, she would volunteer to help behind the scenes with dance camp and other special events. Black says that’s also a testament to her parents, who were very supportive of all their children and their diverse interests.

Lehan’s mother, Anne, says with six children – all in multiple activities – it was a busy household. But that’s the way she wanted it.

“I came from an actively involved family, so I wanted my own kids to be too,” Anne says.

“We didn’t travel. There was no TV. My husband was an angel and we shared the driving. But that’s how kids learn who they are and what they want to be.”

In an interview at her parents’ home, just a few weeks before leaving for Europe last fall, Heather said she was 14 when she decided to study dance seriously. She auditioned for the summer program at the National Ballet School and was accepted.

It was an intense program, “basically a month-long audition,” she says. “By the second week of that month, I learned I had been accepted into the school and that caused a total life change.

“That was when it became real that I could be a dancer.”

So she packed up and moved to Toronto to study ballet in her Grade 10 year. Her older sister, Nancy, was also studying at the ballet school in the teaching stream and they shared accommodation. That helped with her transition to living away from her parents and everything she knew.

But even then she was at a disadvantage in that many of her cohort had been at the National Ballet School since they were 11.

“It was hard for her in the beginning,” instructor Jojic-Begovic recalls. “It was new



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Heather Lehan (right) is shown with her sister, Nancy, at the National Ballet School in Toronto. Nancy, a graduate of the teacher training program, works for the school's community outreach initiative called Sharing Dance.

training, new ways. But she really followed me. She was a reliable student.”

That’s not easy for a 15-year-old to do, Jojic-Begovic says. Teenagers’ minds are often all over the place, and it’s difficult for them to set aside their other worries while in the dance studio and just focus on the dance.

“Heather has a really amazing way of focusing,” she says. “There were never episodes where she was unhappy or stressed. She was never troubled with other ‘stuff’ and that’s incredible for someone in our art form – and at that age.”

She also describes Lehan as a sensitive, emotional dancer and that comes through onstage.

“Dancers are special creatures. They are sensitive to what they see. When they come onstage, you can feel their warmth and generosity, if they have it. You can’t cheat the audience.”

Jojic-Begovic says there’s so much more to becoming a professional dancer than just the technique. “It’s not an easy career. But if you learned who you are and what you need to be successful, if you have integrity, if you have learned to find your voice, then you’ll be able to adapt.

“National Ballet School students come equipped with something special. They are confident people who stand true to their beliefs. They are able to communicate ideas and to listen to their bodies. That’s very important to know.

“This is an exciting time for Heather as she

starts her career,” Jojic-Begovic says. “She deserves the fruits of her labour.”

Lehan is now focused on the next stage – getting a spot as an apprentice with a professional dance company and then working her way up the ranks.

The prize money allowed her to travel to Europe last fall where she attended the Hamburg Ballet School for a few weeks through a learning exchange with the National Ballet School. She also visited the Semperoper ballet company in Dresden and the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet Company in Oslo.

“It allowed me to see what it’s like to be in a dance company instead of a dance school and see if there’s a fit for me,” she said upon her return. “I enjoyed all the companies and will audition for all of them. But I really enjoyed the atmosphere in the Scandinavian countries. They have a great repertoire.”

She might have stayed longer, but she got a role in the National Ballet of Canada’s performance of “The Nutcracker” in Toronto



and had to be back for rehearsals – her first professional, paid performance.

But she plans to go back to Europe this winter on an audition tour, depending on which dance companies accept her application. Dance companies typically hold auditions for new dancers in January and February and make their selection in time for the performance season.

Her fall trip helped open some doors, she says, and she’s optimistic.

“Now I have an idea of what the auditions will be like and I’m not afraid,” she says. “I met all sorts of people and was introduced to some directors last fall. That trip will be a big help for the audition tour in the winter.”

What she knows for sure is that she’ll be back by the spring, in time for the Assemblée Internationale, which is being hosted at the National Ballet School in 2017. Dancers from 22 schools will come to Toronto to perform individual pieces, as well as one large piece they’ll do together.

“I’ll get to be involved in that and that’s pretty exciting,” Lehan says. “The ballet world is pretty small. I’m sure I’ll meet those people again.”

Her mother beams when asked about her daughter and her prospects at becoming a professional dancer.

“We’re pretty proud,” Anne says. “Not just at her being a ballerina, but about her life and the way she lives it. Heather makes the world a better place because of who she is and I’m much more proud of that.”

Heather accepts that because of its physical nature, the career of a dancer is short and can be cut shorter still by injury. So she’s careful, she says. And she works hard.

She also has a strong academic background to fall back on, but she really hopes it doesn’t come to that.

“I want to dance as long as my body will let me,” she says. 



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