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WIN GREAT GIFTS

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A young woman with long brown hair, wearing a white two-piece outfit and a long white skirt, is captured in a dynamic dance pose on a sandy dune. She is barefoot, with one leg raised high and arms extended. The background is a blurred, natural landscape with dry vegetation. The image has a torn-edge effect on the right side.

Once a top ballerina, Carrie Berk, 14, took a leap of faith to follow her heart—and discovered her next act.



From the time I was old enough to walk, I was dancing. I took my first ballet class in diapers, barely able to stand on tippy-toes. I remember pirouetting around my living room in a tutu, imagining what it would be like to be a real ballerina. I went through 10 years and five levels of pre-professional classes, eventually landing my dream role of Clara in a New York City production of *The Nutcracker* when I was 12.

As I took my bows on stage with the Sugar Plum Fairy, it felt like I had climbed a mountain and reached the top. This was everything I had ever wanted. But the next day and in the days that followed, I asked myself, "Now what?"

My ballet school had always been my second home. My friends there were my closest confidantes and we had so much in common—it was like being in a secret club or sorority. If I was having a bad day, they knew exactly what to say to lift me up. But as we progressed up the levels, the instruction got more intense, the hours became longer (I was in class five days a week)...and my love for ballet began to fade.

For so long, I had challenged myself to make it work. Sweating at the barre for 12 hours a week when I also had homework, tests and papers to write? Sure. Turning down parties, hangouts with friends and

ballet dancer—or was there something different out there for me? I knew I had to sit down and figure out what truly made me happy and excited.

Of course, there were things about ballet that had appealed to me and fueled my passion all these years. So I tried to think of the times I felt the most alive: It hadn't been mastering the technique or positions, or even becoming proficient en pointe.

It had been the performance; the electricity of connecting with an audience. I counted the days to every recital because it gave me the opportunity to put myself out there in the spotlight. That had been what was driving me all along.

On a whim, I took a class aimed at helping teens become "triple threats" in acting, singing and dancing. We learned everything from improv to how to deliver a dramatic monologue to interpreting a song.

Something clicked. Maybe it was the thrill of getting to work and learn from Broadway legends. (The program, Triple Arts, was taught by Terrence Mann and Charlotte d'Amboise—he was Javert in the original *Les Misérables* and she played Roxie more times than anyone in Chicago. Goals.)

Maybe it was pushing myself to try things outside of my comfort zone (Charlotte showed me how to do my first cartwheel). But at the end of those brief two weeks, I

started posting cruel comments on social media about me, calling me a quitter and a loser. Others told me I was leaving because I wasn't "good enough."

I tried not to let it get to me. It didn't matter what they said, because I was confident. Besides, my true friends and family cheered me on, encouraging me to move forward and never look back. These are the kinds of people you should want in your life, the ones who applaud and smile as you grow—not the ones who try to bring you down. I didn't care if anyone tried to put me down; I never wavered in my choice.

Fast forward a year, and I've branched out into so many different styles of dance: lyrical, tap, jazz and hip-hop. I still take ballet four times a week, but not at a pre-professional level. I train regularly with a vocal coach. I even shot a pilot for a reality show about kids bound for Broadway.

There hasn't been a moment when I felt I made the wrong decision. I made new friends who welcomed me into the theater community with open arms, even though I was a newcomer. And as things start to happen for me, I'm so proud that I set these wheels in motion.

Even if the thought of change is scary, it's important to realize that life is constantly about reinventing yourself. Pushing your limits, even rocking the boat...it's the

POINT

BY CARRIE BERK

extracurriculars because there was simply no time for anything else? Of course.

But I'll never forget the Halloween night I spent in pointe class, finally leaving in tears because I missed trick-or-treating with all my friends. It might seem like a silly thing to get upset over, but it felt huge to me at the time—like I was constantly missing out on all the little things that made life fun.

As my teen years approached, I started having second thoughts about what I really wanted to do. Ballet had always been a constant for me—people expected me to be a ballerina, didn't they?

But for the first time ever, I questioned my future. Did I want to be a professional

rediscovered my joy. Musical theater was what I wanted to do—and it felt amazing to finally be so sure.

When I told my parents over dinner one night, they weren't surprised at all. They had seen the change in me even before I did, and they were thrilled that I wanted to branch out and try new things.

Telling my ballet school I was going to leave was easier than I thought: I broke the news in the dressing room shortly after I told the director of the school. There were congratulations and hugs, and I thought everyone was genuinely thrilled for me.

But then there were whispers behind my back. Someone I thought was my friend

only way to grow. If you don't step outside of your boundaries, how do you figure out what you truly want to do or be? How do you figure out what you don't?

I took a leap of faith—bigger than a grand jeté. So far, it's been a breathtaking experience. And I know now that if something bigger, better and more exciting comes along, it's OK to go for it. I might just discover a whole new me. ☺

Carrie Berk is the author of two best-selling children's fiction series, *The Cupcake Club* and *Fashion Academy*. Check out her newest, *Model Madness*, (\$8, Sourcebooks Jabberwocky) on sale Jan. 1.