

Dear Dance Parents,

I wanted to send out this email on Saturday night, however after the day events, I found myself exhausted. I was simply physically, mentally, and emotionally drained as we I am sure we all were.

Because there was a lot going that night, and I know many parents are still trying to figure out what occurred, I will recap:

The first event of the evening, was that a boy from Underground Dance Studio, physically assaulted Christian in the boys dressing room. The boy, I don't remember his name, came looking for Christian, the kid walked up to him, and said something to effect of "you wanna fight" and proceeded to attack him. The boy was looking to apparently fight him so that it could be video taped for something called "worldstar". The kids later informed me that "Worldstar" is some kind of internet fad where people apparently randomly seek out people to fight. The boy had a girl with him who when the fight started, she yelled out World Star, and began recording. The thought of it is simply disturbing. This fight happened right before Dive in, right by the stage. I am the one who stopped the fight and pulled the kids apart. Although, Christian handled himself and did what he had to do in terms of defending himself, (I literally had to pull Christian off of the kid), the fight left Christian extremely shaken up. He suffered a panic attack as a result and could not continue his remaining performance. The kids who saw the fight were shaken up as well. They were scared and sad for their friend. The older kids were also extremely upset and took to immediately consoling their friend.

I immediately reported the incident to Shawn, the competition director, and after Dive In went off stage, myself, and Ms. Hilda (Christian's Mom) met with the directors of Underground Dance, the boy's mother, and Shawn. The directors of the studio seemed genuinely shocked about the events that transpired. The boy's mother did not seem too surprised. After 12 years as a public school teacher, it is very easy to spot the parents of the "problem kids", as they are the ones who never seem shocked or phased by the things that their children do, no matter how egregious the action. In our meeting, Shawn, the competition director, offered the resolution that the boy was to be disqualified from the competition and the studio be allowed to continue the rest of the competition. This solution was not acceptable to me, as I felt that there needed to be a larger studio consequence as this action was a clear violation of the competitions rules of unsportsmanlike conduct. From there we called to speak with Gary Pate, the International Director of Star Power and the president of the Star Dance Alliance. Gary stated in all of his 30 years of owning Star Power, he has never had an incident like this happen before, but stated that he was hesitant about disqualifying the entire studio for the actions of one student. I told him that there needed to be some kind of studio consequence for this action because as a team, the actions of one reflects upon the group as a whole. In our discussion, Shawn suggested the idea of disqualifying the studio for the day and making them ineligible for receiving any of the days awards, and allowing the studio to return on Sunday to compete the remainder of their routines, starting fresh. The boy would be furthermore banned and removed from the rest of the event, and any future Star Dance Alliance competitions (Starpower, Revolution, and Nexstar). Even if attending with another studio. I found this consequence acceptable. The studio directors were notified. It was sad that the remainder of their team had to be punished for the actions of one, however, that is what it means to be part of a

team. I am guessing that the directors of the studio made this a teachable moment for their students, because they still made the team stay for the final awards ceremony. It was very sad. Many of the kids sat and cried as they were not called up for any awards. Yesterday, the director of the studio again apologized to me and gave me a hug. She stated how embarrassed they were, and thanked me for allowing their team to competing on Sunday, knowing that if I pushed it far enough, they could have been disqualified from the entire event. I accepted their apology and thanked them for being cooperative during the situation. Christian felt better after a good night's sleep and was able to come back to compete on Sunday.

If that incident wasn't crazy enough, there was another. At this competition was a studio called ZD Dance. They are a small studio located based in Capitol Heights, MD. I had never heard of them prior to this competition. Early on in the day, it became clear, that the studio was new to the competitive dance scene. This was first made evident in the overall attitude of the dancers, parents, and teachers. They were immediately rude and standoffish. Back stage as our dancers would wish their dancers "good luck" or say "goodjob", they were blatantly ignored. Even as an adult, I went to introduce myself to one of their teachers who was standing next to me back stage and who looked very familiar to me. I extended my hand to greet her, and said that she looked familiar to me, she responded back with "No I don't". As the day went on, their teachers, students, and parents became increasingly rude, and out right nasty. A group of their dancers ganged up to harass and bully several of our students and a few of our students were pushed and shoved.

This harassment came to a head with one of their parents (we later found out it was a friend of a friend), pushing Ms. Nija (Janiya's Mom), and a few of our students. In addition to this physical assault, this woman called our dancers and parents "Bs" and stated that she was going to "F- us up". This scene happened in front of our children who immediately became scared. I was made aware of this incident as we came off the stage after the Experience. Ms. Juva (Ms. Nija's mom, Janiya's grandmother) alerted me of what was going on. I could see kids and parents coming down the hallway totally upset. And a few of our teens who were super emotional and crying themselves, saw that their mothers were upset and immediately started to charge down the hallway in defense mode. I have never in all of my years as a studio director and dance teacher have had an incident such as this occur at competition. Once I told the kids to stay where they were, I called (ok, I yelled) for Shawn, the competition director, to follow me. Shawn called for the woman from ZD Dance, her name was Olivia, to come out of their dressing room and he and a staff member from the performing arts center spoke with her about what happened. She of course denied the whole thing and lied about everything she had done. She said that she was going to leave. As she walked down the hallway, and past our parents, she proceeded to tell our team, who I had instructed to step aside so that she would not have a reason to talk to them, to "Get the F out of her way" and then continued to yell and scream more curse words. Shawn, whom she did not know was right behind her, heard the whole thing.

I called to speak with the directors of ZD Dance and engaged in a meeting with the two directors and Shawn. The directors claimed that all day my students were rude to their students, and that one of my students "spit" on one of her students. I told her my students would do no such thing. I also asked Shawn in all the years that he has known me or my students, has there ever been a problem, He said

“no, never”. I also told her that if there was a problem with my students, she should have spoken to me or another one of our adults as our names are clearly visible on our t-shirts all day long. From there Shawn told ZD Dance that they would be disqualified from the entire competition and that they needed to leave. Following the suggestion of Ms. Juva, I decided that it would be best for our students and parents to leave the competition in order to avoid any further confrontations. And the staff decided to stay for the awards ceremony.

When I finally left the venue that evening, one of the ZD directors approached me at my car. She apologized and said how embarrassed she was about the incident that occurred. I told her she should be. She told me that this was their first year competing and as a studio. I said, I could tell. She said she didn't want bad blood between our studios, and that she follows us on facebook, and our studios are close to each other. I said to her what was more sickening about this whole thing, is that we are two African American studio owners and that we should be supporting each other. Not fighting each other. She agreed, and said she didn't want us not to get along because chances are we would see each other again. In my head, I said, that will never happen and I will make sure of it. We shook hands and I drove off. The next morning, Gary Pate called me to check on the team and see how Christian was doing. He told me how much everyone at the Star Dance Alliance loves our studio and our kids and that they were beside themselves because of all of the events that occurred. I told Gary I wanted that team banned from the Star Dance Alliance. He said to me that those were not people that he wanted to do business with, and that he could guarantee that we would never see ZD Dance at any Star Dance Alliance events.

To my new dance parents, I want to assure you that the events of this weekend are not typical of any competitive dance event that we have ever attended. In our 11 years of business, we have never had any problems with other studios. And we have always been known for our complete professionalism and kindness towards others. Because of this we have made friends with studios from all over the country including studios from our area. Dance competitions are events designed for children, and despite being competitive in nature, go out of their way make the dancers feel special. Please know that events of this weekend are not typical and extremely out of the norm. On Sunday, the kids joked that they saw the “New York” come out of me on Saturday Night. As leader of this team, and director of this studio it is my job to protect my students. I have never seen my students and parents so distraught. It brought me to tears to have to hold my students who were crying. It completely broke my heart. As I type this email, and think about the scene, I can't help but tear up all over again. On Saturday I immediately had to go into mother hen mode, and make things right.

As I reflect on Saturday's events, I am also overwhelmed with a huge sense of pride for this team. I have never been more proud of my studio. I have never been more proud to be the founder and director of Star Makers Academy of Dance. First I was proud of my students, who despite being exhausted and upset, went out on stage and gave the performance of a lifetime and danced for Christian. They tore up the stage in the name of their friend. I have never in my life seen my dancers perform that way. They took all for their emotions, all of their frustrations, and left their hearts on the stage. They literally shut it down. Christian felt the love all the way from the wings, and stood there and cried as he watched them perform. At one point he said, “I love these guys so much”, and all I could manage to say, because I was crying so hard, was that they were dancing for him because the love him too. At the end of the

performance, all of the dancers were crying. They came off and held their friend, hugged me and Ms. Gwen, hugged their team mates. The minis who you would think were too young to understand what was going on were also crying and saying that they did it for Christian. I knew in that moment that I had witnessed the strength of the bond these children share, the power of friendship. I also witness something even more powerful. Before each competition, I send out a facebook post asking my family to pray for my dancers, their parents, and me. That morning, my aunt posted on my facebook page, Isaiah 54:17 "No Weapon formed against us Shall prosper". On the stage that night, I saw that first hand. I thank the lord that night for protecting my dancers, their parents and for guiding all of us through that difficult situation.

Secondly, I was proud of my parents. Through out it all, not only did my parents represent the studio beautifully, but everyone came together as a dance family to support each other. There is no better way to describe what I witnessed then the word family. I saw parents consoling other people's children. People were literally on the floor holding kids who were hysterical. I saw parents, helping coordinate the dancers, parents help pack up costumes, pack bags. I have never before seen us so united. Everyone came together to support each other because they genuinely cared. This is the lasting feelings that are in my heart after the weekend. I hope that everyone else felt this as well.

Let us press on with the remainder of our year, stronger then we have ever been before. Thank you for everything parents. I am looking forward to a successful, and less eventful, competition next weekend!

I will send an email with Saturday's awards and notes for the week.

Yours in Dance,

Ms. Stephanie