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## Faces of Austin: Dancer gets back in the zone with her own studio

By Robert Rich

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Elizabeth Walter comes from a long line of dancers. Born in Austin, she moved to Northern California, trained for the Moscow International Ballet Competition

and visited the homes of some of the most talented Russian ballet dancers of the day.

A bachelor's degree in psychology from UT put her on the fast track to a professional business career, but the tech bust of 2000 ruined that plan, leaving Walter with many part-time gigs but nothing to fill the gaps. Then she opened The Dance Zone, the unobtrusive dance studio tucked away in West Campus. And, as she says, the rest is history.

There is a long tradition of dancers in my family. My grandmother taught ballroom dance in the Crystal Ballroom at The Driskill [Hotel] when she was only 16 years old. She was also a classical pianist, so she would play and I would flit around the room doing what she'd taught me combined with improvisation. It was then that I decided I wanted to take classes.

After moving back to Austin in the late '80s, I got interested in what would later become known as hip-hop while dating a break-dancer. The story is a lot like "Save the Last Dance," "Step Up," etc.

Our choreographer was a visionary. She combined all genres to create fresh and innovative routines. My favorite piece my boyfriend and I did to "Baby" by Prince. He was a break-dancer in street clothes, and I was a ballerina in a tutu and pointe shoes, and we each danced our styles in this cutting-edge pas de deux. There was a little comedy and some incredible lifts, and it was something no else was doing at that time. I wish I had it on videotape.

I moved to [Los Angeles] in 1989 and was assisting a very accomplished teacher and professional dancer, André Paradis, when I had my knee injury. It required ACL reconstruction and removal of my lateral meniscus. Meanwhile, André was performing with Prince at the [GRAMMY Awards] — the famous buttless pants performance.

The Dance Zone is the only all-adult studio in Austin, and until recently, we were the only studio to offer breaking. We're known for our laid-back attitude and positive vibe.

I'm not sure why so many UT students still don't know we're right here in The Castilian dorm after almost seven years.

I prefer to choreograph and dance jazz because of the diversity of it. I can be powerful and acrobatic, or hot and sultry.

You may not know that The Dance Zone hosted the Austin auditions for MTV's "America's Best Dance Crew" last October. The producer felt we were the best fit based on our cutting-edge urban classes, all adult/college market and awesome UT dorm location.

I think it's important to think about what shows [like "So You Think You Can Dance"] are saying about and doing to our dance culture. The bar has been forever raised. Dancers in this new generation who want to make it had better be prepared for everything.

Several dancers I know have auditioned [for the show] and attended clinics regularly. I was surprised but not sorry to hear that it's no



Photo courtesy of Ron Parks Photography

Elizabeth Walter, owner of The Dance Zone, talks to The Daily Texan about break-dancing, Prince and her tucked-away West Campus dance studio.

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different behind the scenes than any other reality show. There are a lot more big egos and harsh comments than we see on TV. It's often not the best dancer that makes it, and that can be quite disenchanting to someone who's new to the competitive side of the business.

Dance is one of our most fundamental vehicles of self-expression. It requires no tools or lessons and knows no boundaries. Dance is beauty, power, fitness, health, hard work, fun, camaraderie.

Mention this article and get a free first dance lesson from Walter.

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