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Laguna Hills dancer going to Bolshoi Ballet Academy

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LAGUNA HILLS – Mable Yiu is in the passenger seat of her mother's Lexus sedan. She pulls a dark blue latex band tightly around her foot, pointing and flexing her toes against it.

Yiu, 16, spends part of every car ride from her home in Laguna Hills to her dance school in San Clemente working the muscles in each foot. She loves to do sky-high leaps, and strengthening her feet gives her more power when she launches herself off the floor in class.



Mable Yiu, 16, right, practices at the Pacific Coast Academy of Dance. Yiu is one of ten students in the country selected to study ballet at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow.

LEONARD ORTIZ, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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"If you have strong footwork you can move faster. So you look alive," Yiu said. "You don't want to look slow because it makes you look heavy."

Yiu dances 20 hours a week at Pacific Coast and that work is paying off. She is one of 10 students in the country selected to spend six weeks studying Russian language, culture and ballet at the Bolshoi Ballet Academy in Moscow.

The dance program is part of the National Security Language Initiative for Youth Program, which offers scholarships to U.S. high school students to learn the language and culture of foreign countries. Yiu will spend half the day dancing and the other half learning Russian and discovering Moscow.

She is primarily a ballet dancer and takes classes in technique, classical and contemporary ballet.

"There's so much to love about it," Yiu said before a recent class. "It's a really beautiful art form."

She spent the last two summers attending classes at the Bolshoi Academy in New York. When she found out about the program in Moscow she knew she had to give it a shot.

Ballet isn't Yiu's first sport. Her mother, Mei Ling Yip, said Yiu played golf as a young girl and even dabbled in ice skating. At age 6, she enrolled Yiu in a ballet class.

"She just kept on asking for more," Yip said.

The little girl's talent surprised her mother because there aren't any dancers in the family, Yip said.

Yiu takes all Advanced Placement classes at Laguna Hills High School and even took her ACT college entrance exam one weekend while competing in Florida at the World Ballet Competition.

Yiu said the stress of homework and unfinished projects fades once her class begins with teacher Maria Lazar. Yiu has worked with Lazar off and on since she began dancing, and credits the instructor with advancing her skills.

Lazar has a few rules: be on time, dress for class, secure hair tightly in a bun, and no talking.

"The discipline really helps us focus on what we are doing in the room," Yiu said. "With her help, I can kind of push those thoughts aside and go there because I love to dance."

Yiu plans to take that same focus with her to Moscow when she trains with some of ballet's elite – in the Russian style of dance she admires. Russian ballerinas, she said, emphasize the grace in their arm movements.

While she's excited about traveling to what some call a mecca of ballet, her first love is standing at the wooden bar in the San Clemente studio – in black leotard, hair swept in a tight bun – and dancing.

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