

BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

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How many people know exactly what they want to with their lives at the age of 11? And how many people are willing to move halfway around the world, away from their families, to spend most of every day practicing something that requires intense concentration and discipline at an age when most kids are riding bikes and playing in the mud? The answer: not many.

That is one thing that makes Julian MacKay, an 11-year-old ballet dancer from Bozeman and the only boy from Montana ever chosen to attend Russia's elite Bolshoi Academy of Ballet, so special. Julian, a polite, well-spoken kid with neatly combed hair, expresses no hesitation in declaring his goal. "I want to be a professional ballet dancer in a European company," he said. "That's why I'm so excited to go to one of the top three academies in the world. It's not like a maybe or a might—you will become a professional dancer if you go here."

Theresa Khan MacKay, Julian's mother, laughs and shakes her head. She and her husband Greg are the parents of four ballet dancers, including Julian and his 8-year-old brother Nicholas. Her two older daughters are professional dancers in Europe. "When my first daughter mentioned ballet, I just thought it was cute," Theresa, director of the nonprofit Youth Arts in Action, said. Neither she nor her husband dances, and she didn't know where the request was coming from. "I didn't pay that much attention, didn't think she was serious." But she was. So when Julian at age 6 started asking to dance, Theresa knew what to expect. Ballet was a serious sport, requiring an incredible amount of dedication and time. "I said no at first," she said. "I knew what was coming."

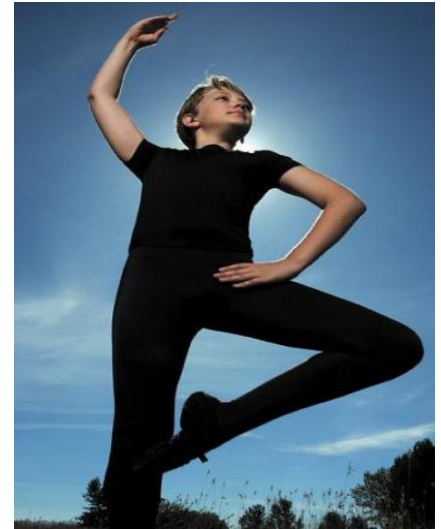
But after watching Julian "jump around in the yard and copy my sisters," and fielding more pleas, she relented. Julian began the six-day-a-week training regimen that would eventually land him auditions for the Paris Opera Ballet School, the Royal Ballet School in London, the "Billy Elliot" Broadway production and the Bolshoi Academy.

Montana not being the heart of the ballet world, the MacKays knew they would eventually need to send Julian elsewhere to study. He has spent the majority of the past four summers and some of the year training in California, New York City and London. It was during a program this summer, an intensive six-week clinic by the Bolshoi Academy on the East Coast, that Julian was selected - after only three weeks - to attend the school in Moscow for a year. "You have to be invited just to audition," Theresa said. "You have to get through a couple hundred kids — that's how much he wants to do it. For a boy to make it this far, the world's open to him."

Rina Kirshner, vice president of the Russian American Foundation that sponsors the Bolshoi summer program, said Julian was the only American boy from the younger group of students to be chosen for the yearlong program. "Every dancer, whether male or female, is chosen based on their talent, discipline and their ability to sustain a very rigorous ballet training," Kirshner said. "There's only a small percentage that combines those factors into one. He definitely demonstrated his desire to become a professional dancer."

The Bolshoi program will be tough—in addition to six days a week of classes, students are also required to take a Russian language class, a ballet history class and a music class, plus their regular tutoring. Julian isn't unfamiliar with hard work. His typical day begins at 8:30 a.m. with a one-and-a-half hour ballet lesson. A 30-minute break is followed by another lesson. His training also includes sit-ups, push-ups and swimming. His homeschooling is fit in around ballet whenever there's time. For fun, Julian likes to play with his brother, compete in chess tournaments and occasionally fence with the Montana State University Fencing Club. "That's pretty amazing for any boy — you get to play with swords!" he said. But, he casually admits, there isn't time for much else besides ballet, and that's OK with him. "My main focus is dance because I want to be a professional dancer," Julian said.

Because of his age, Theresa and Nicholas will go to Russia with Julian in October, and Greg will remain in Bozeman. "I learned from my daughters, if a kid chooses this, that's great, but they need a parent there," Theresa said. "Kids adjust really easily. I give him three months to learn Russian." Before boarding the plane, the family will spend a few weeks in California for Julian to train and get in some much-needed kid time before beginning the rigorous yearlong program. "He's a little kid, he needs to go surfing," Theresa said, as Julian nodded vigorously. Lauren Russell can be reached at lrussell@dailychronicle.com or at 582-2635.



SEAN SPERRY/CHRONICLE
Julian MacKay, 11, will attend Russia's elite Bolshoi Academy of Ballet for a year.