

Readers' Donations Help Teen Attend Ballet Academy

After a story about 14-year-old Matthew Leonardi ran in *The Times*, he began receiving letters and donations from all around the country. He left Saturday for the Bolshoi school in Russia.

By David Kelly

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Matthew Leonardi seems a bit stunned by it all. Not long ago, the cheerful 14-year-old found out he was the only American male accepted at the world-renowned Bolshoi Ballet Academy this year. But a lack of money meant his chances of actually attending were slim. Then his story hit the media.

On Saturday, Leonardi left his San Bernardino home to fly to Moscow and begin his studies. "I can't believe so many people care," he said. "I didn't think anyone would pay a cent for ballet." After his story appeared in *The Times* last month, he was flooded with letters from all over the country, many containing checks for \$10, \$20 or even \$1,000. Some people wrote poignant messages, including one from a man still smarting over his mother's refusal to let him take ballet when he was younger. "Her response was, 'Don't be ridiculous,' which just crushed me," he wrote. "I'm 58 and I still can't dance."

Another wrote, "You have been gifted with a beautiful talent. May you always make the world of the arts proud in your love and struggle to be your best." Leonardi has been diligently writing thank-you notes in response, which he sends along with photos of himself. The academy's tuition is \$18,000 a year and he's received over \$7,000 as well as individual pledges to sponsor him over the next four years. It's enough money to get him through the door, and his mother is taking it day by day.

"I didn't think it was going to happen," said Valerie Leonardi, a single mother of four who teaches kindergarten in San Bernardino. "I kept going through the money and I kept changing the goal. If I could pay this bill late or that bill, maybe I could do it." In a time of short attention spans and e-mail, she said, she is surprised so many people sent letters. "It's really touching that they would take the time to do this," she said Thursday. "I feared we wouldn't be able to afford it, but I never told Matthew so he wouldn't think he wasn't going."

Matthew's 79-year-old grandfather, Alvin Marcus, a former music professor, sat at the living room piano, where he often plays ballet music he composes himself. "It's so hard for me to believe this has happened," he said. "Usually only affluent parents could afford to do this."

Matthew has been dancing since he was 4. Growing up in a tough San Bernardino neighborhood, he learned early on not to talk much about ballet or tights or tutus. Instead he focused on football and basketball and kept the ballet to himself. As he matured, he began winning local and national competitions. Last summer, he was spotted by Russian dance teachers at a workshop in Connecticut. Soon after, he was asked to attend the prestigious Bolshoi academy, a rare invitation for an American. Until this weekend, the tall, trim teenager had never left the country. He worries about things like the language barrier and leaving his close-knit family.

"I can't wait, I want to go right now but I really wonder about missing my family," he said a few days before leaving. People have also planted new anxieties. He asked nervously about the Russian Mafia and whether he would likely run up against them. His mother smiled and said such an encounter was highly unlikely. Then there was the cold. "It's going to be freezing when I get there," he said anxiously. "It's going to be like the Ice Age."

The academy also told him there would be no television, which really hurt. As for the actual rigor of the dancing curriculum, Matthew said he was ready for it. "I'm pretty used to it because I dance a lot every day," he said. "But I know they are very strict."

Meanwhile, letters keep arriving.

"I tell every one of them, 'Thank you for helping me follow my dreams,' " he said.