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Enterprise Story: Profile: Franni Monari

“For me, dance never feels like work or just a regular after school activity, it is something that I truly love,” explained Franni Monari, 17, a junior at Nazareth Academy High School. For the last fifteen years of her life, Monari has been dedicating her time and energy into the art form of dance in hopes of one day turning her dream of becoming a professional dancer into a reality.

Growing up in a family full of dancers and performers, it was only a matter of time before Monari would follow in her loved ones’ footsteps. At the young age of two years old, Monari accompanied her mother while she ran the after school dance program at St. Jerome Grade School in Northeast Philadelphia. It was there that she made her first dancing debut as she performed with the preschool class in their annual recital. From that moment on, Monari has danced in over 100 recitals performing in group, duet, and solo routines. In third grade, Monari performed her first solo to music from the hit movie *High School Musical*, “Bop to the Top”, a mixture of jazz, hip hop, and theatre dance. “It’s really funny to compare my first solo to my most recent solo. They are so different and I have definitely grown into a much more serious and motivated dancer,” she stated. Currently, Monari dances at her mother’s dance studio, DeFino II Dance Studio, as well as the Nazareth Academy High School Dance Club. She takes classes in ballet, tap, jazz, hip hop, modern, and pointe, every Monday thru Thursday. In addition, Monari has performed in numerous play productions throughout the years. This past year, Monari earned a leading role as famous fitness instructor, Brooke Taylor Windham in Nazareth Academy High School’s rendition of *Legally Blonde the Musical*.

In addition to her training, Monari shares her skills and passion for the arts with younger dancers. In third grade, Monari began assisting the dance instructors at DeFino II Dance Studio with their classes. Her main role was to accompany the young dancers on stage while they performed, as well as helping out with smaller jobs during class such as tying shoes and walking the children to the bathroom. In ninth grade, Monari made the transition from student teacher to dance instructor as she began teaching on her own. "I love passing on the skills I have learned over the years to my students and I can only hope that they will grow up to develop the same love and determination for dance that I have," explained Monari. Currently, Monari is employed at both the Nazareth Academy Grade School and St. Jerome Grade School's after school dance programs where she teaches ballet, hip hop, and acrobatics. As dance instructor, she is expected to choreograph routines for both the holiday and spring recitals. In addition, Monari continues to provide her assistance in class every Saturday at DeFino II Dance Studio.

Not only is dance a passion and means of employment for Monari, it is an outlet in which she can let go, forget about her daily stresses, and just be herself. During a difficult period in her life, Monari turned to dance to help get her through. Like many thirteen year old girls, Monari struggled with the awkward years of weight gain. However, last year during her sophomore year of high school, Monari's struggle took a dramatic turn as she started developing an eating disorder. Monari's eating disorder first began with bulimia and at 5'6, her weight ranged between 115-120 pounds, an extremely low BMI for her height. "After about ten times, I was able to stop throwing up but after that I just stopped eating all together so that I wouldn't have to deal with the guilt after eating an apple," she stated. With the development of anorexia, Monari began experiencing many symptoms such as sudden mood swings, weakness, dizziness, hair loss, and a complete stop of her menstrual cycle.

Dancing, something that was once a natural way of life, quickly became a constant struggle. Due to her symptoms, Monari was finding it difficult to keep up in class. “When you don't eat, you lose a lot of muscle, so really you're just leaving the fat on your body and waiting for your fat to eat away at your own fat until there is just skin and bones left,” she explained. Out of all of her classes, pointe, ballet, and jazz became so physically and emotionally challenging that Monari couldn't handle it any longer. “I would feel faint and have to take a moment and get a drink because my eyes would get all fuzzy but I didn't want to make a big deal because I didn't want anyone finding out I had a problem,” she said.

As the summer approached the stress of having to be surrounded by others in school subsided and Monari slowly began feeling as though she could start eating again. However, she found it hard to escape the guilt after indulging in food and with her summer dance intensive at The University of the Arts fast approaching, she came to the realization that it was time to seek professional help. A few days before her dance intensive began, Monari saw a therapist at the Renfrew Center, who due to her condition, did not think it was in her best interest to participate in the intensive. “I was literally heart broken and was willing to do anything it took in order to convince both my therapist and parents to let me go,” she stated. Knowing how important this intensive was to her, Monari's mother allowed her to participate as she kept a close watch on her diet. However, she explained to Monari that when the two week intensive ended, she would be attending a rehab program to help with her eating disorder. “I hated rehab at first and I actually had a slight meltdown at the center before the first session, but I ended up making friends and I really feel like I benefited from it and if it wasn't for dance, I honestly do not know if I would have had the motivation to seek help,” explained Monari.

Although Monari has made a dramatic improvement since this time last year, her diet is always on the back of her mind. However, she has made the realization that in order to pursue a career in dance and perform to her fullest potential, it is important to not let anything jeopardize her health. As Monari looks to the future, she hopes to attend college in New York City, majoring in dance while minoring in Communications. Her ultimate goal is to become a performer of any kind, such as a dancer in a prestigious Modern Dance Company, Hip Hop or Improvisation group, or even become a famous Rockette. In addition, she hopes that her story will help young women who are battling with an eating disorder realize that no struggle is too difficult to overcome and if she can do it, everyone can. Monari's mindset has made a positive transition as she now believes that, "being comfortable in your own body is not about perfecting your insecurities, but embracing them."

Source List

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