

## SATURDAY OBSERVER

# The debutantes play hockey and rugby. They volunteer at soup kitchens. They want to be actresses, teachers and politicians.



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Lauren Edwards and Sarah Argent wade through a sea of ballgowns at dressmaker Justina McCaffrey's warehouse in Gatineau.

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She wasn't crazy about it at first, she recalls, rolling her eyes and scrunching up her nose at the memory.

But she eventually caved in and has been taking private lessons since the fall. She's now enjoying them so much, she plans to continue long after the ball.

"(I'm) less skeptical about ballroom dancing — it's not something that's just for old people," says Touran. "It's definitely a classy thing, and it's very cool."

With just a couple of weeks to go, the dancing duo will sneak in any chance at a two-step, even if it's between classes.

"We do pirouettes and dance through the hallways — it's a little frightening," laughs Nadia. "Ever since we started this Viennese thing, we just start spinning around."

The practices and all the goofing around seem to be paying off.

When they twirl left, she twirls left.

"Left, right, twirl," yells Melissa Krulick, fighting to be heard above the music at the dance studio.

It's a challenge. Her voice is straining to compete with peals of laughter and goofy jokes shared between couples.

But Ms. Krulick cuts an imposing figure, despite being shorter than all the teens. She has a commanding voice and a stare that can persuade any teenage boy to shut up.

And she has a sense of humour that can unleash a wave of giggles.

There are just two weeks to go and four new faces at the rehearsal means there'll be changes to partners and starting positions.

Couples shuffle clumsily to the music. A few brave girls in high heels teeter.

The looks on their faces range from fierce concentration to utter confusion. There's the occasional look of surprise when someone nails a twirl, and a squirming look of pain when someone's foot is stepped on.

"It's critical you all go at the same time or you're going to get hurt," shouts Ms. Krulick, who has been training debutantes and cavaliers for five years.

Two of the new faces belong to Aleana Young and Alexandra Keys, who were asked to join after a mix-up with dancers led organizers to think they were short of debutantes.

"I was a bit nervous about the choreography but I was glad it was pretty easy to pick up," says Alexandra after the rehearsal.

She also dances jazz, tap and hip hop, so her ability to effortlessly pick up the moves isn't a surprise.

"I love dancing and performing — it counters the shyness."

"I often think that if I hadn't gotten into dance I would be an introvert ... Dance has been a huge part of my life."

Even so, she admits she's nervous about performing under the glare of lights and the gaze of hundreds.

"If you're thinking about your

moves, you tend to mess them up because you start obsessing. Hopefully, I'll be able to concentrate on having fun."

It's a tidbit of advice she should share with some of the debutantes — those who look like they're stepping over imaginary puddles while doing "heel, toe, toe," a move, say many, that's much harder than it looks.

But no need to fret, everything's coming together, says Ms. Krulick reassuringly.

"They have it all down. It's just polishing and polishing and polishing."

There are two girls whose gleaming movements need no waxing. Brianna Porter and Andrea Innes float effortlessly across the floor. Both were debutantes last year and both study dance at Canterbury High.

They move to a different beat, literally and figuratively.

Brianna, wearing an oversized sweatshirt, a pair of ripped plaid pants, with hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and no visible trace of makeup, is refreshing in a room filled with more polished appearances.

"What's really cool (about the ball) is we get to go for free," she says later.

Andrea's long dreadlocks, thick vintage belts and colourful scarves, fuses into a look that most stylists would love to mimic but would fail

at miserably. She looks like a 1960s hybrid of a student straight off the Berkeley campus and a bohemian from Greenwich Village.

Her flair for style and individuality won't be lost on the night of the ball. She's planning on being the rebel in pearls and roping a long string around her neck.

Last year, debutantes were discouraged from doing so, for the sake of uniformity.

"Looking the same, that kind of bothers me, so I'm going to try to get away with pearls," she says.

She may even be bold enough to fix them in her dreaded hair, which will likely be swept up in a loose bun. Neither she nor Brianna is sure what they'll do with their hair or makeup. But they're not sweating a thing. For an event that few ever get a shot at, doing it for two years in a row makes them old hands.

They offer the others advice:

"Just have fun. Go out on the dance floor and work it," says Andrea, adding they're expected to dance throughout the night.

They'll be sort of like go-go dancers without the bodypaint, and they'll have to keep the dance floor buzzing, without the bump and grind.

Some of the girls look freaked out. Dancing the opening ceremony is stressful enough, but to have to waltz all night in pinching heels?

"Have fun," says Brianna encour-

agingly. "And don't be afraid to talk to people."

Carrie Wallace is ready for chatter — she's been practising.

Her top three questions are: Isn't this a lovely evening? Is this your first time at the ball? And, depending on the answer, how many years have you been coming? Or, simply: Are you having a good time?

There's about one week left and the energy level at Fred Astaire has hit an all-time high.

"Practise your performance smiles — Chins up, smiling ... SMILING," yells Ms. Krulick.

"If you guys don't smile, I'll have to do my Peter Pan dance," she shouts before leaping into the air and bouncing across the room with her arms flailing wildly.

The threat works and all mouths are smiling. The dancers' movements are fluid and their timing is impeccable, most of the time. Each flawless rehearsal is greeted with enthusiastic applause.

"Repetition is the mother of skill." The excitement that's been brewing for weeks is now boiling, with the ball as the only breaking point in sight.

For Olivia McNee, that moment will be extra "weird" because her parents will be there.

"It's almost weirder to think that my parents will be there — they're

so excited to see me," she says.

Her mother admits there will be sadness mixed with pride when she sees Olivia that night.

"It's emotional for a mother to see her daughter all grown up in a ball gown," says Sue McNee, who will be attending the ball for the third year in a row. This time, she'll be snapping photos like never before.

Familial pride is something Brianna can relate to, she says, adding "my grandma's obsessed I'm going."

Last year, her grandmother went to local media outlets soliciting photos of the ball so she could cherish them as keepsakes.

There's no denying the past five weeks have been a trip, for some more than others — one of the guys admits he's starting to feel like this is a chore.

For most, the best part has been the new friends they've made — even surpassing the high of shopping for dresses.

"Most of the people didn't know each other so it's been neat to laugh and have a good time with strangers who have become friends," says Marielle.

"I've changed the way I feel about meeting new people and taking on new challenges."

Marielle, who attends an all-girls school, admits she was a bit "unsure" about what dancing with the guys would be like, particularly since it involves movements called "the cuddle."

But her partner, Aldo, the joker of the group, has helped make the experience a blast, she says.

"I don't mind talking to (new) people but I thought I'd be a little on edge and I haven't. I think it'll inspire me to be more outgoing."

"I'll remember that I got through this."

This is the last time they'll all be together on a Sunday afternoon — they've only got one more dress rehearsal on the eve and day of the ball.

"They're great, they're ready," says Ms. Krulick.

"Every now and then, one will do something they're not supposed to, but they're ready."

Their near-flawless performance today means they're free to leave early.

But few do so. After an hour-and-a-half of performance smiling, they seem ready to explode.

Polka music blares and some of the guys show off their Russian dance moves in front of the girls. Aldo, of course, is front and centre.

They squat down low to the ground, cross their arms in front of their chests and try slapping their feet as they're kicked from underneath them into the air.

If nothing else, this gang is definitely ready for one big party.

Late yesterday, Brianna told organizers she was not well and no longer able to participate. Her absence means Peter Zachar is also unable to participate.



JEAN LEVAC, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Touran Reddaway has one final fitting just before she picks up her custom-made gown from designer Farah Abedi.

TOMORROW: COVERAGE OF THE BALL AND THE DEBUTANTES' DEBUT.