



McKenna Ross, Erica Ross.

Growing up in the same household forces a lot of sisters to share: clothing, attention, food, secrets.... But for Gilbert sisters Erica and McKenna Ross, what they've been sharing lately is success.

Both sisters recently returned from NYC bearing the national title *Outstanding Dancer of the Year*; Erica, 18, captured the title in the senior category and little sis McKenna, 10, in the mini. The competition is hosted by the New York City Dance Alliance, which auditions anywhere from 30,000 to 40,000 dancers nationwide, all of whom are hoping for

a shot at the highest honor, *Outstanding Dancer*.

As title holders, both Erica and McKenna will tour with NYCDA, traveling from city to city with previous competition winners to perform for convention attendees and assist in dance classes with some of the industry's most sought after choreographers.

A well-established presence in the dance community, the NYCDA has strong ties with the entertainment industry and the Ross sisters will have the opportunity to tour with dancers who've lit up Broadway

stages to those who've appeared on national TV.

In fact, Fox's hit series *So You Think You Can Dance* has featured many previous NYCDA performers, such as Danny Tidwell, Jamie Goodwin, Travis Wall, Alison Haulker, Nick Lazarinni and this year's winner, Sabra — many of whom will be accompanying Erica and McKenna on their upcoming tour.

Erica, who holds a long list of national titles, says one of the most memorable parts of the competition was sharing the experience with McKenna.

WRITTEN BY LORI ARCHIBALD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIRK KERN

A double dose of dance

local sisters bring home national titles

"When she won I just broke down in tears because I was so happy!" she says. "It was absolutely one of the proudest moments of my life. It was also really inspiring for me to watch her because she has so much energy and fun when she's dancing, she's just like a little pack of dynamite when she gets on that stage."

Holly Cook, company director and instructor at Tempe Dance Academy, is one of the girls' teachers. "It looks as though the Ross family has two natural born dancers," says Cook, who acknowledges that raw talent is just the beginning; the girls also put in hundreds of hours of training.

"In preparation for the competition, Erica and McKenna both attended a ballet intensive (with) world renowned Lidia Segni of Argentina," Cook says. "In the evenings they would take regularly scheduled classes which include ballet, jazz and acrobatics."

Add to their rigorous training schedule hours spent practicing in their home studio, and you have two very determined young ladies. Both sisters admit dancing six days a week can be grueling, but it helps to have such strong support from teachers and family — and, of course, your sister.

"My biggest dance hero is definitely my sister, Erica," McKenna says. "She has always supported me in everything I do and always helps me practice when she has time. She has done so much with her dancing and I really look up to her. I also really love my dance teachers, Mike, Holly, Wanda and Tammy. They have taught me so much... and they always push me to improve and point my feet —they are the best teachers in the world!"

In addition to *Mini Outstanding Dancer of the Year*, McKenna was also recently named *Miss Petite Dance of America* in the National Dance Masters of America competition, only the second national winner from Arizona

in the 40+ years that the state has been associated with Dance Masters.

Parents Sue and Paul are audibly bursting with pride as they talk about their daughters' accomplishments, but also admit that the girls' intensive training schedules do have an effect on the rest of the family.

"This has definitely been a roller coaster ride for us," Sue says. "To have girls involved at the level we do, takes a lot of sacrifice by all. Our schedules revolve around their schedules and the hours of practice and rehearsal can be overwhelming.... But the rewards for them personally, and for us as parents, are great when we see them succeed and shine on the stage."

Brothers Matt (21) and Jordan (14) aren't dancers — they're more the soccer and basketball types — but their sisters' dance careers have been an influence.

"They have had to make many sacrifices to be at the girls' events," Sue says. "But they have in turn enjoyed traveling to many awesome places as a result. Our boys have developed a real appreciation for the arts, and even know all the names of the professional dancers and choreographers! We are definitely a dance family!"

As for the future, Erica plans on attending college to study dance or musical theater, and hopes to launch a career on Broadway. McKenna, who still has plenty of time to think about her 'grown-up' plans, think Broadway sounds fun, too, or maybe teaching or owning her own dance studio.

Whatever happens, both sisters agree that dance will remain an important part of their lives, and encourage other dancers to pursue their goals, as well.

"Never ever, ever give up on your dreams," Erica says. "If you love to dance, there is a stage just waiting for you somewhere."

Erica and McKenna will be touring with the New York City Dance Alliance through May.

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