

Krutzkamp and The Joffrey Ballet's Kathleen Thielhelm. Other graduates have gone on to dance at the Boston Ballet, Alonzo King's LINES Ballet, Richmond Ballet and Canada's Royal Winnipeg Ballet. Former students can also be found on Broadway, with the Rockettes and in prestigious dance programs at universities around the country.

"To maintain a close and nurturing relationship between students and faculty," says Faesi, fewer than 45 students in grades nine through 12 attend the school's full-time academic program. VSA also holds a summer intensive program. Admission to both the highly selective academic year program and the summer intensive is by audition only. Bosman, Faesi and other staff members hold auditions for both programs each January and February in 25 cities across the United States.

To be admitted to VSA, a student must have "talent, potential, focus, drive and an incredible hunger to learn," Faesi explains. "We do not seek finished dancers but enjoy the process of guiding, enabling and allowing them to discover how to channel their abilities."

A typical day for a VSA student begins bright and early at 7:20 am at Lynchburg's E.C. Glass High School, where each student gets a well-rounded academic education. Several VSA students opt for the rigors of honors and advanced placement academic courses in addition to their dance schedules.

Dance studies begin after lunch each day with a 90-minute ballet technique class. Students are divided into levels according to age, ability and gender. Following technique class each day, the girls alternate between pointe, variations and pas de deux, while the boys have body conditioning, pas de deux and variations. A third class is either jazz, modern, improvisation or composition. Each week the students have two modern classes and one composition or improvisation class with jazz and musical theater dance thrown into the mix now and then.

Rehearsals for upcoming performances are held four times a week: from 6:45 pm to 8:15 pm Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays and from 11:30 am to 3 pm on Saturdays after ballet class.

VSA faculty considers performance a key part of the school's dance curriculum. The school produces three main stage performances annually: *The Nutcracker* (in association with Glass High School), the Summer Dance Showcase and An Evening of Elegance, a gala performance in which guest choreographers stage works on VSA students. Past guests have included American Ballet Theatre's Kirk Peterson, who brought his *Carmen*, and Leslie Peck, who staged George Balanchine's *Serenade* and *Allegro Brillante*.

"We try to provide the students with exposure to great choreographers and dancers, because we believe that if you want to be a dancer, you must have access to dancing of world-class caliber," says Bosman.

Less than a quarter of VSA's students hail from Virginia,



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which means the majority of students have left their families and traditional high schools behind and taken up residence in the dormitories that have been created out of two restored Southern mansions. VSA students are a geographically varied bunch, representing some 16 states (including Alaska), Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico and Japan.

In addition to the wealth of challenges they face with their academic studies and dance classes, most students are experiencing life away from home and their families for the first time. To help them adapt to independent living, VSA has instituted wellness programs to address the students' emotional needs. Topics in this program have included stress management, conflict and anger management, nutrition and injury prevention. Students can also be screened for muscular weakness or imbalances. Local medical professionals, including orthopedists, physical therapists and psychologists, are available for consultations on a regular basis.

However difficult it may be to be away from their families, most VSA students say the independence makes them more mature and in turn, makes them better dancers. At VSA, "you must be more careful, every step you take, because there is no one there—like your parents—to fix your mistakes," says junior Maizyalet Velazquez of Puerto Rico.

Sam Lopp, a junior from Maryland, says that when attending classes with students from other prestigious schools, he sees that VSA's training shows. "We [VSA students] are often singled out in classes by the teachers," Lopp says. "We generally stick out in class as being more uniform, competent and disciplined."

For more: www.vsaart.org 