

» *Who Knew*

Raising the Barre

Leaps, turns, and pretty girls have this Young Artist of the Year flying high on the dance floor

AS I PULL UP TO THE UHR HOME on Evansville's East Side, 17-year-old Jonathan comes out to greet me. The exuberant young man calls, "Hi Wendy!" and holds out his arm to escort me into the house, where Buster, the family's golden Labrador retriever, welcomes me with large paws and a flapping tongue.

Although Jonathan is excited to talk to me, he quickly points out that it's almost time for his TV shows.

When his mother Valerie Uhr tells him the interview is more important, he takes a seat on the living room sofa, throws his arms into the air, and with a smile says, "So, ask me some questions."

This blend of personality traits makes up the juxtaposition that is Jonathan Uhr — part special-needs student with Down syndrome and part outgoing spirit who can work the crowd, in his mother's words, "like a politician." The Harrison High School junior attends special education classes and says, "I love school, but I hate homework." He is active in his church's youth group, involved in Boy Scouts, and is a weekend host at Biaggi's restaurant. Jonathan also is a huge Justin Bieber fan. But the real object of his affection is ballet. He says, "I was born to dance."

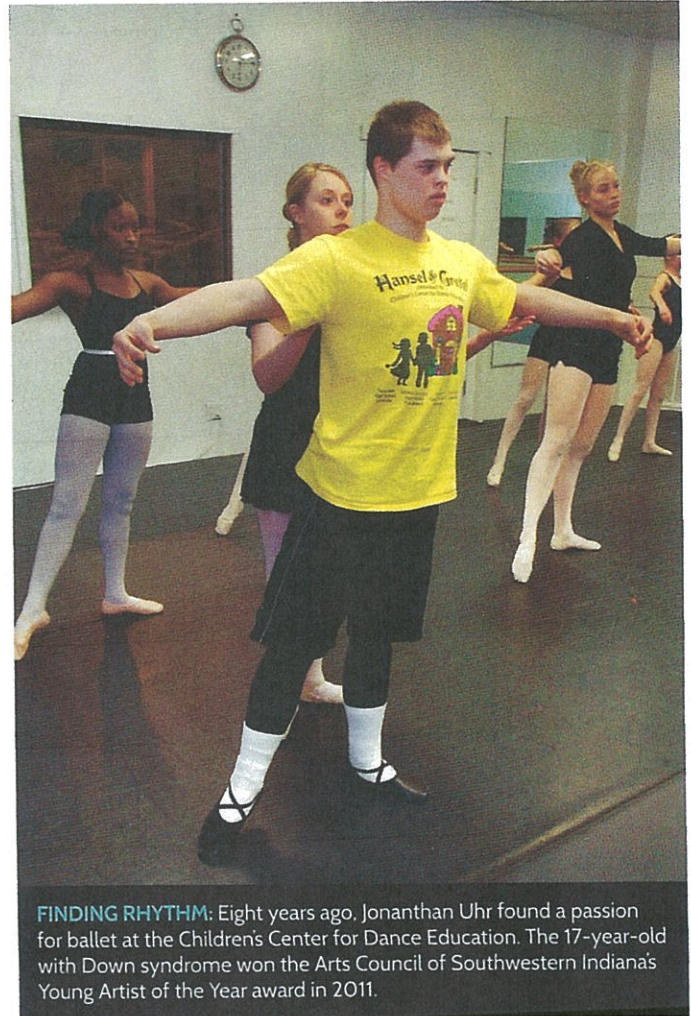
Jonathan, who started dancing in the third grade, won the Arts Council of Southwestern Indiana's Young Artist of the Year award in June 2011 and will star in the Children's Center for Dance Education's production of *Don Quixote* in May. "I love being in the company and I love being with other people," he says, "especially the girls."

Deena Laska-Lewis, artistic director at CCDE, is largely responsible for helping Jonathan find his passion. She first noticed him eight years ago, waiting with his mother while Kristin, his sister, now a 19-year-old secondary education student at Anderson University in Anderson, Ind., took dance lessons. Ms. Deena, as her students know her, strongly supports involvement in the arts for special-needs children and asked Uhr if she would consider letting Jonathan give dancing a try.

"He was having trouble in school at the time," says Uhr, who originally declined the offer. "I just didn't need one more person telling me what he was doing wrong or what I was doing wrong."

But Laska-Lewis was persistent.

Eventually Uhr relented, and today she is glad she did. She says Jonathan loved dance from the moment his feet hit and rhythmically left the floor. It has helped develop his self-esteem and improve his coordination. Uhr says family members tried unsuccessfully for years to teach Jonathan to jump, but he took right to it as part of an organized dance activity. Of Laska-Lewis,



FINDING RHYTHM: Eight years ago, Jonathan Uhr found a passion for ballet at the Children's Center for Dance Education. The 17-year-old with Down syndrome won the Arts Council of Southwestern Indiana's Young Artist of the Year award in 2011.

PHOTO BY NATALIE GREER

Uhr says, "She has a gift for working with those with disabilities."

Along with Laska-Lewis and his fellow dancers, Jonathan has a great support system at home. His father David, 47, is a corn breeder with Dow AgroSciences in Mount Vernon, Ind. His mother, also 47, works weekends as a physical therapist at Methodist Hospital in Henderson, Ky., allowing her to be available through the week to meet the demands of running a household, including "taxi service" for Jonathan and younger brother Austin, age 13. "Thursday is Jonathan's one night at home," she says. Like any teen, his extracurricular activities keep him on the go nearly every night of the week.

Jonathan's future is not yet clear. He graduates from high school in 2013, and Laska-Lewis, who also teaches dance classes at the University of Southern Indiana, already has begun to lobby for him to enroll there after graduation. While Uhr is unsure, she is hesitant to say 'never.' "He has no inhibitions," she says. "He can get really focused on something, and when he does, he's going to do it."

— Wendy Hudson

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