

Last year Berrend Dance Centre won the gold medal for ensembles for ages 13 to 17.



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Pressure-free fun

Jaelyn Fellona, director of International Ballet Theater Academy in Frazer, Pennsylvania, praises the Kozlovs for paying attention to what teachers want and providing students of all levels with a good experience.

"The Youth Dance Festival is well organized and not as stressful as some competitions. We feel it's a good introductory competition for younger students," says Fellona, whose students have placed at YDF as well as at the Youth America Grand Prix regionals. "We don't want our students to have an emphasis on winning as much as we would like them to focus on performing. [The Grand Prix] has more to offer serious students as far as scholarships or possible job placements, but with that comes more pressure. We only take students to [the Grand Prix] that we feel want to pursue dance professionally."

For students who love to dance but aren't ready or interested in being professional dancers, Fellona says, attending

YDF has proven to be beneficial. "The process of rehearsing makes the students stronger physically, but dancing onstage makes them grow artistically," she says. "We enjoy both competitions for our students."

Pat Berrend, director of Berrend Dance Centre in Olney, Maryland, said she likes to take students to YDF every year to show what they can do and see how they compare to other dancers in a context that suits her students better than "regular" competitions. "There are a lot of competitions out there and a lot of schools do the circuit and go to a competition every weekend. They do their hip-hop, and their lyrical, and their jazz, and whatever," Berrend says. "We're mostly a classical ballet school. We do those other forms of dance as well, but we focus on ballet. And I like that the Festival's focus is ballet too. That's why I only do the Youth Dance Festival, and sometimes to the Grand Prix."

Having both ballet-centric events available to students helps everyone feel they have an opportunity to perform. "I can take some of my other dancers who would like that competition experience but wouldn't necessarily be strong enough to go to the Grand Prix. They get to do something," Berrend says.

For 15-year-old Kinsey Novak, a student at the Rafael Grigorian School of Ballet in Elmira, New York, YDF "is a very nurturing environment. It's a wonderful experience. The whole atmosphere is great. I got really nice feedback from the judges and also from the directors, who are really nice. They all gave me such good advice. It's very warm and welcoming and the directors really make you feel at ease."

Novak, who has won awards and scholarships at YDF, says her prizes at YDF included new tutus—a luxury her family would not have been able to afford, she says.

Says Novak's mom, Michele, about YDF, "It's a very friendly environment; everybody has a smile on their face. The rules are very practical and clear. It really is a great way for kids who appreciate the art of dance to get better." ♦

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