

M E E T A N E X O N I A N

Hannah MacKay '17

HIP-HOP DANCER ON A RUSSIAN STAGE

By Sarah Zobel

Hannah MacKay '17 is happy to talk about her experiences as a dancer, and she's equally happy to discuss her three trips to Russia, but she isn't sure where to start. The beginning, a logical place, takes her back to her first ballet lesson, at age 2. Yet by the time she was living in St. Petersburg in the fall of 2015, MacKay had moved on to hip-hop and commercial dance. She'd also become fluent enough to attend a Russian high school full time.

The in-between for the Massachusetts native included the Maine-based Bossov Ballet Theatre's summer program, where director and ballet master Andrei Bossov invited MacKay to join a handful of dancers he was taking to Russia to perform in a festival. She was in eighth grade.

"It was a little strange because I didn't know the language," she says. "I had a view of Russia just from what I'd seen in the movies and on TV." But that trip was the genesis of MacKay's interest in the Russian language. And when she had to decide between a dance-focused high school in Florida where the learning happened largely online and Exeter, with dance on the side, she chose the latter.

"That's where I set my path. I figured the most reasonable thing would be to get a better education and keep dance as a passion, something that I want to continue professionally," MacKay says. It's a passion that already fills her days. With another trip to Russia over the summer between her prep and lower years — this one, again to St. Petersburg, accompanying a dorm mate to properly learn the language — MacKay came home and went straight to a six-week program at the San Francisco-based Alonzo King LINES Ballet. There she was introduced to a variety of contemporary dance genres, including hip-hop.

"I just kind of fell in love with that style," MacKay says. With her characteristic enthusiasm, she joined a company that competed in Los Angeles at World of Dance, an international event at which hers was the only American team to place. She's now a member of the Static Noyze Dance Company, traveling to Boston three days a week for rehearsals.

MacKay has continued to study Russian at Exeter, but she also wanted to immerse herself in the language.

"Every time I went abroad I was picking up on things, but I feel like I left at the peak of my being able to jump in" and become fluent, she says. Dusting off a term-abroad program that hadn't been used in six years, MacKay received the Modern Languages Department's blessing and support, and, accompanied by her mother, went back to St. Petersburg last year. From August through November they lived in an apartment in the heart of the city. MacKay enrolled in a public school located in a building that housed kindergarteners through 12th-graders. With about 20 students per grade level, it was, says MacKay, "like a family." She tutored one student in English and was amused to observe the relationships between teachers and students.

"They'll hug them, they'll throw a shoe at them," she says of some teachers. One of them invited MacKay to a conference in Novgorod that turned out to be a Model United Nations, where, after two and a half hours, MacKay's resolution on women's representation in politics passed.

This summer, MacKay will be in one of the former Soviet states — Estonia — through the U.S. Department of State's National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y), an immersion program for languages that are less commonly taught in U.S. high schools.

"I really love Russia. I love the politics, I love the language, I love the culture. Any chance I have to go back, I'll take it," she says. And after locating several hip-hop studios online and joining classes around St. Petersburg last fall, MacKay is looking forward to the chance to get back to more hip-hop. ■



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