

The TIMES

of Smithtown Township

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Volume 24, No. 18

July 7, 2011

75¢

Ballerina inspires, teaches students to dance

Russian-born Valia Seiskaya danced in Greece, opened successful dance school in St. James to continue her passion

By BRITTANY WAIT

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Newspaper pages coat three walls of the Seiskaya Ballet Studio in St. James. Awards and framed proclamations hang from the walls of her office in the studio. Black-and-white pictures of its founder, Valia Seiskaya - standing 5 feet tall with a muscular shape, dancing and contorting her body - hang from the wall behind the desk.

"My dream is to make dancers," she said in an interview recently.

Seiskaya, 74, took her first ballet class at the age of 5. As a Russian-born ballerina, she danced in Athens, Greece when her mother and grandmother moved her there. She danced in the National Opera at 17 years old, reaching the rank of featured soloist. She toured Europe and Russia with the company and trained under ballet masters and choreographers for most of her life.

With her thick combined Russian-Greek accent, Seiskaya's husband, Dimitri Papadakos, translated for her, "She can't say she didn't go places."

The dancer founded Seiskaya Ballet School in 1974 - one year after she retired from the National Opera of Greece - instructing 11-to 14-year-olds.

Seven years later, she established the Seiskaya ballet Academy as a more advanced training program for serious dancers. In 2006, she introduced the open program to not only compliment the academy, but offer more classes with flexible hours.

"The ability to see art is an



The American Dream ★★ ★
An Immigrant's Story

She has the uncanny ability to know which student will go on to succeed in ballet. Still, she says her best student is 'the next one.'

amazing gift," said her husband, 66, also administrative director of Seiskaya Ballet. He served in the United States Air Force in Greece when he met his future wife and has lived in Smithtown since 1957.

"This is my dream," Seiskaya said. "I saw the attention from the children and I still go home and tell my husband about them."

She opened up her own studio because she felt that American ballet schools were inadequate and taught too many disciplines. She couldn't dance anymore because she needed to take care of her two children, Athena and Peter and run the studio, so instead she taught ballet.

"Once she got her own kids, her own studio and started seeing what effect she was having on the kids, then it really focused her," Papadakos said. "It's her dream."

She teaches something different in each class, but her style never changes. She pushes her students to work harder.

"Valia has the uncanny ability to look into a room of 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds and say 'that one,' and ten years later, that's the one that made it." Papadakos said. "It becomes self-fulfilling because she



Photo by Brittany Wait

Valia Seiskaya teaches a ballet class at her studio in St. James.

helped that kid make it."

Seiskaya noticed that her student, Anna Craddock, now 15 years old, "had something" at the age of 10.

"She was a workaholic," Seiskaya said. "She never missed class." Every day, when Seiskaya was young, she used to sneak into ballet studios at the National Opera in Athens to practice dancing, so she expects commitment to the art and appreciates dedication from her students.

Craddock, of Stony Brook, has danced leading roles like the Sugar Plum Fairy, Dew Drop, Chocolate Soldier, among others in Seiskaya's Nutcracker in 2010. She placed fourth at the World Ballet Competition in Florida last year, first at both the Metro Talent Competition and at the Hellas International Ballet Competition in Greece in 2009, which won her full scholarships to the Bolshoi Ballet Academy Summer Intensive in New York, the Rock School for Dance in New York and Valentina Kozlova's Dance Conservatory of New York.

"Valia will help me become a bigger and better ballerina and to be successful at other companies in the future," said Craddock.

Many of Seiskaya's students have participated in summer workshops offered by the Ballet Education and Scholarship Fund. Many have been awarded full scholarships by schools affiliated with well-known companies including the American Ballet Theatre, the Boston Ballet and New York City Ballet.

Another student of hers, Danielle Lovetro, 11, of St. James, also started dancing when she was 6 years old. Now, she practices for an hour and a half, six days a week.

"She doesn't focus on one person, she focuses on everyone," said Lovetro.

Seiskaya has confidence in her students and if they push themselves to never miss class and spend years training, she knows they will make it just like she did. It is her dream to help them make it.

"If you ask me who is my best student for all of these years, I'd say the next one."