

Park Place

MAGAZINE

 Mom 2.0

Dancing Queens

By
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A search for world-class ballet for budding ballerinas drove two Montclair moms to start their own "mommy venture." Now their creation takes the national stage.



TUTU IS BETTER THAN ONE: Mary Kate Mellow and Stephanie Troeller joke that together they form a "super worker."

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HEN MARY KATE MELLOW'S NEARLY-THREE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER FELL IN LOVE WITH THE ballet after seeing *Cinderella* with her grandparents, this 40-year-old mother of two wanted to give her budding ballerina an opportunity to see more world-class performances. But, much as little girls love pirouettes, tutus, and all things ballet, taking a preschooler to the matinee is a risky (and expensive) endeavor. Staying still, keeping quiet, paying attention for two and a half hours—those are difficult demands for a bouncy child.

Mellow set out to find a DVD with top-notch ballet that would appeal to the tiniest of dancers...and came up empty. After venting her frustration to fellow Montclair resident Stephanie Troeller, a 42-year-old mother of four who had toured in a preprofessional dance troupe as a teenager, the pair decided that there was a need that, perhaps, they could fill. "It was a shame that there was nothing our girls could get up and dance to," Mellow says.

The two hammered together a business plan to create the DVD they'd been looking for—one that includes dazzling real-life performances and an opportunity for fun living-room dancing. After shopping their business pitch around without success, they set out on their own to make it happen. Mellow had some experience in small business when she ran a wholesale jewelry company. Troeller had worked as a cartoonist, and she'd grown

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up in the dance world. But for the most part, the two were entering an entirely new territory and figuring out a new business by themselves.

They dressed their young daughters and their friends in leotards and tutus and had a dance party professionally filmed in Troeller's backyard. "We started with the joy of the children and went from there," says Troeller. After watching every professional performance of *Swan Lake* they could find, they ended up purchasing the rights to the Paris Opera Ballet's production. To connect the professional rendition to the backyard party, they filmed young students from the School of American Ballet in New York demonstrating specific ballet moves. To add a little more fun, they incorporated a video montage of toys and animals making similar motions. Narrating the story of *Swan Lake* and the ballet lessons is an animated fairy named Prima Princessa, who wears a pink dress and a tiara and was designed by Troeller, who previously worked at Hanna-Barbera, DC Comics, and Warner Brothers.

After a year of work, a \$50,000 investment of their own money, and the help of friends in the editing and production fields, Mellow and Troeller had their first creation, *Prima Princessa Presents Swan-Lake*, a 45-minute DVD that teaches and entertains blossoming ballerinas.

Since the product launched in late November, *Prima Princessa* has been picked up by Amazon.com and is currently

ranked third in children's dance videos. It's available in Capezio Dancewear shops across the country and five Learning Express stores in New Jersey. The \$19.99 DVD—which recently received the Dove Foundation's "Family Approved" seal—can also be purchased at primaprincessa.com.

Mellow and Troeller hope to create more DVDs with other ballets and, eventually, dances from around the world. "There are so many different types of dance, and it would be a fun adventure for Prima Princessa to travel to Africa or to Brazil or to China," Troeller says. "The possibilities are really endless. It's truly inspiring."

Troeller and Mellow also found inspiration in each other. "As a partnership, if you're having a difficult day or the kids are sick or your energy is low, the other [person] can pick up the slack," Troeller says. "We trade back and forth with work a lot. We combine to form this great super worker."

Mellow agrees: "It's really easy to work together, because we really understand each other's lifestyle." That lifestyle includes getting the kids to and from school and taking them to sports practice or tutoring sessions or doctor's appointments—managing two very busy households. As they were creating the first DVD, the duo packed in as much



NIGHT OWLS The duo did the brunt of the legwork while the kids were asleep.

work as they could while their older kids were at school and after the children went to bed. "You can get a lot of work done between 8 PM and midnight," Mellow says.

Now the workload is less intense, but they're still regularly making calls and getting word about *Prima Princessa* out to parents, without spending on advertising. Mellow says even the late nights aren't so bad, because they really believe in what they're doing. "We feel it is such a quality product," she says. "It's culturally enriching, it's wholesome, and great for kids. So we just feel we're doing something that's worthwhile."

Back when their eight-year-old boys were toddlers, they shared their hopes of finding careers that would bring them success and satisfaction, while allowing them time with their families. "We made very conscious decisions to stay at home with our children, but we just wanted something more," Troeller says. "And now we've found it."

"Born on a playdate, inspired by our children, fits into our home life," says Mellow. "This really is a mommy venture." ☎



DANCE PARTY: Mellow and Troeller with their bouncing children.

PRIMA PROFESSION

"We've just been loving it so much that it doesn't feel like a job or a chore. It really inspires us to see how it enriches our children's world."

—MARY KATE MELLOW

"We use our time fully. We really figured out how to have our cake and eat it too."

—STEPHANIE TROELLER