



Courtney Willingham: FROM INSPIRED TO INSPIRATIONAL

You can watch Rainsville's Courtney Willingham perform in two music videos. See her in Lauren Alaina's music video "Georgia Peaches" (www.youtube.com/user/LaurenAlainaAlIVEVO) and in Little Big Town's music video "Pontoon" (www.cmt.com/videos/little-big-town/785168/pontoon.jhtml).

cutlines: left - Willingham does a grand jeté jump during a photo shoot. This page top left - Willingham (left) with Lauren Alaina (center) and another dancer who performed in the Georgia Peaches music video. Top right - Willingham. Bottom - Willingham teaching students at Alley Cat Dance Studio in Rainsville.



PHOTO BY LOGAN INGLE

Eighteen-year-old Courtney Willingham of Rainsville clearly remembers the exact moment she decided to pursue her passion and become a dancer. She was just thirteen years old, and had been taking dance lessons for only a couple of years, when she had the opportunity to go see a touring show of the popular television program So You Think You Can Dance.

"It was the year Travis Wall was on tour, and I will never forget watching him and thinking 'That is something I can do,'" Willingham recalls. "Before that, dance was a hobby and I knew I loved it. But after that, I realized what I could actually do with dance, and that I could really go somewhere with dance."

So she packed as many dance classes as possible into her already busy school schedule, focusing first on ballet. "Ballet is like the foundation; if you can do ballet, you can do any type of dance," she explains. When her ballet teacher moved, Courtney began traveling to Huntsville to take classes

from the directors at the Huntsville Ballet company, Philip Otto and Rachel Butler. This left Courtney relying on her father for rides until she turned 16 and got her driver's license.

"My dad would go with me and wait, and then he was eventually like, 'Ok, you can go by yourself!'" says Willingham. "So I would drive to Huntsville every day after school and do ballet."

As much as she enjoyed it, Willingham knew she would never end up as a ballerina. "Training to be in a ballet company was not what I wanted to do," she says, "because it's so confining and I'm going more for the commercial dancing." So while she was in Huntsville for her ballet classes, she would also go to other studios for hip hop and jazz classes.

It was during one of these trips that Willingham met Tyce Diorio, a So You Think You Can Dance choreographer, and received some encouragement that would redouble her dedication to dance. "He saw me do a solo at Merrimack Hall, and afterward he told me

that he couldn't take his eyes off me," she says. "He gave me some really encouraging advice and told me not to give up on my dream. That was one of the best times of my life."

Before long, her dedication and skill started to garner notice among other big names in the commercial dance world. An agent spotted her at an audition when she was just 15 and eventually signed her to DDO Artists Agency. It was through the agent that Willingham learned of an audition in November 2011 for a new video by Lauren Alaina, last year's runner up on American Idol.

It was only Willingham's second big audition. "I was super nervous," she says. "There were people there who were really good dancers, who I knew but who didn't know me." But she knew that if she wanted the job, she had to rise to the challenge.

"I couldn't hold back," says Willingham, "because it was the opportunity I had been waiting for."

Fortunately, the choreography turned out to be relatively basic, and

not "blow-my-mind difficult," says Willingham, who found out just a couple of hours later that she'd gotten the job. A few weeks after that, she was back in Nashville on set for the 13-hour shoot, tasked with teaching Alaina herself the dance moves.

"I went to hair and makeup – that was really fun because it was the first time anyone had done my hair and makeup – and then I was told to go teach Lauren the dance," she says. Willingham describes Alaina as "just a normal teenage girl." But when it became clear that Alaina was better at singing than dancing, a lot of the footage was removed from the final version.

Nevertheless, the experience was a positive one and paved the way for Willingham to audition for other music videos and such high-profile dance shows as So You Think You Can Dance and America's Best Dance Crew. And recently, she's started working closely with Tony Selznick, the founder of prestigious McDonald/Selznick Associates, on how to manage her career.

"Tony is a great contact for me," she says. "It's very tempting to say, 'I'm going to dance and not go to college,' but he's really encouraging me to go to school and dance."

After all, Willingham adds, "I'm obviously not going to look like I'm 20 years old or be a backup dancer forever!"

That's why Willingham, who just graduated from Plainview High School, will be starting her freshman year this fall at Santa Monica College – but not as a dance major. "I'm not going to major in dance, because I want to keep the passion for it. So my major is going to be broadcasting," she says, adding that Santa Monica offers internships at VH1, MTV and Sony.

"Eventually," she says, "I want to have my own dance studio."

It's a long-term plan that makes her father, Davy Willingham, happy. "He's more of a realist," she says. "I know that he's proud of me, but I know he's also like 'Courtney, you need to go to college and you need to have a backup plan!'" Davy, owner of Body Vision

Family Fitness Center in Rainsville, worked for Farmers Telecommunications Cooperative for 19 years.

As for what her mother would feel, Willingham can only guess; Cheryl Willingham died in a car wreck in October 2000, leaving behind her seven-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son, Chase. "It was really, really, really tough for me, but going through things like that just makes you stronger," Willingham says. "No one will ever take my mom's place. But I know God gave me the gift of dance to be my outlet, and I know that every time I dance, it makes her proud."

And ultimately, that's what dance means to her. "I've been given this gift for a reason," she says. "And while I want to dance in videos and movies, that's not what it's about. My goal is to share my talent and inspire people."

"I can't imagine myself ever doing anything else," she adds. "Ever." ■