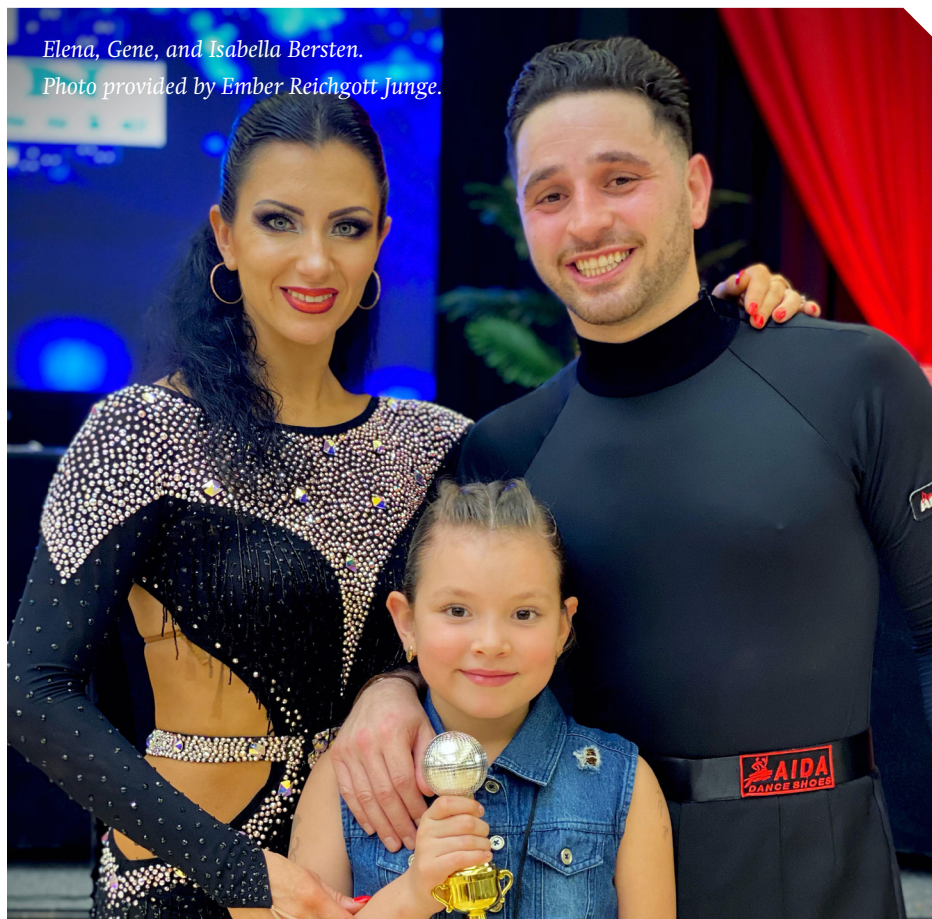


Dancing with Russians

Bersten Family Dances Through Generations

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



Elena, Gene, and Isabella Bersten.

Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.

LAST OCTOBER ABOUT 40 students from preschool age through high school dominated the floor at Minnesota Madness, particularly in the International Ballroom and Latin styles. All of them came from Dance with Us America Dance Studio, dancing under the watchful eyes of their teachers and studio owners, Gene and Elena Bersten.

This was a vivid illustration of a remarkable early legacy of Gene, 32, and Elena, 37, who have taught “hundreds of kids” over 18 years in Minnesota. Both started teaching at the tender age of 15; Elena taught in

Russia before coming here. Their students experience success on and off the dance floor. The studio has produced 13 national champions, including members of the Bersten family. One student taught ballroom dance to his fellow midshipmen before he graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy.

Today, the Berstens teach students of all ages, while themselves competing professionally in their recently created American Rhythm partnership. “Children can learn dance at four years old,” explained Elena, originally from Orel, Russia, a four-hour drive

from Moscow. “It makes their memory better and their movements better. They become more confident than other children.” Their own daughters are proof positive. Isabella, age 8, can dance 10 dances and is competing at the Gold Level in International Latin and Ballroom. Gabrilla, age 5, is also competing. And Nika, almost 2, won’t be far behind. Their family dance story does not come by accident. Both Gene (born in Belarus of the former Soviet Union) and Elena come from families immersed in dance. Their teaching of today mirrors the Russian cultural teaching they experienced from their own dance coaches. Their journeys were not always easy.

Throughout it all, their lives were driven by unwavering commitment to hard work, setting goals, and achieving results.

“We didn’t have anything special,” recalled Gene of his years growing up. “It was just that ‘drive.’”

“Anyone can achieve anything if you really want to. You really have to want to. If you look at anyone’s success story who achieves anything, they all had one thing in common—they all had that drive and they all wanted it more than the other person. Whoever wants it more is going to achieve it.”

Gene’s family instilled that ethos in him. When Gene’s parents moved to the U.S., they had to give up their citizenship in Belarus. Gene’s mom was an engineer; his dad was a recent Army veteran. They moved to the U.S. with “literally no money in their pocket.” They didn’t speak a word of English.

“My parents are some of the hardest workers you’ll ever meet. That’s where I got my work ethic,” Gene said. They became U.S. citizens. Gene’s dad started fixing cars and is a mechanic today; his mom cleaned houses while she went back to school, working her way into new careers, including her current

position as Director of the Virginia Piper Cancer Institute in Minneapolis.

Gene started dancing ballroom, ballet, and jazz around 11-12 years old. His first instructor was Robert Foster, who made dancing “a big part of my life.” He and his sister Melanie (five years younger) and brother Alan (six years younger) “were all into it.” Gene’s mom and a partner started a studio in Minnesota. At age 15, Gene started training with World Finalist Aleksandra Gisher, who has been his coach for 16 years since. Gene received the majority of coaching in the family, because his parents didn’t have money

for lessons for all. Then Gene would teach Melanie and Alan.

“We spent every free minute at the studio dancing,” said Gene. “We would bring our coach here every two weeks. That was very expensive; she lived with us and was like a mother figure to us. She guided our dance careers, taught us how to practice, and how not to waste our time with it. When people have their coaches with them every day, they take it for granted. We didn’t have that. We had to soak up everything while coaches were here, because we knew when they left we were on our own. We tried to get the most out of that and then afterwards work every day.”

By age 16, Gene’s routine was set: he picked up his dance partner from school, practiced a few hours, taught lessons, and at the end of the day practiced more. “What helped us to be better is that we were teaching at the same time. I was teaching mainly kids. We had a huge kids program here in Minnesota when we started. It was mainly the Russian community who came to support us.”

One of his students was his brother, Alan. “My brother and I were very competitive. I taught him four to six times a week. Family teaching family is the hardest thing to do. Every lesson was very personal because of our



124th Weekend Getaway

November 20-22, 2020

CANCELLED DUE TO COVID-19

2021
The Best
is Yet
to Come

Save the
DATES!

2021 Ballroom Dance Weekends
April 16th - 18th, 2021 • June 18th - 20th, 2021
September 24th - 26th, 2021 • November 19th - 21st, 2021

VILLA ROMA RESORT *Your new adventure awaits*



365 Villa Roma Road • Callicoon, New York 12723

Rates and Information Coming Soon

Weekend Includes:

Lodging • 7 Meals
Cocktail Party/Open Bar Wine/Champagne Party
Over 50 Hours of Workshops
Entertainment Nightly • Dancing in 4 Venues
Top Nite Club Entertainment Each Evening

www.StardustDance.com

Call for a Brochure to be mailed (845) 794-4982 Outside of the US and Canada (845) 794-4707

EMAIL US: info@StardustDance.com ♦ VISIT OUR WEBSITE www.StardustDance.com

Stardust Dance Productions, LTD is registered with the State of Florida as a Seller of Travel, FLA Seller of Travel Reference # ST37320

competitiveness. But whatever I said to him was because I always wanted him to be better,” said Gene. “Before every competition, we would have a big talk to get him motivated in the right way. It’s a mind set. We’re competitors. If we want to win, we first have to win in our heads. If you have any self-doubt, it always comes out when you are dancing. I always do this with my students. I want them to feel nervous in the lesson, not at the competition. That’s my mentality in this.”

That mentality seemed to work. All three Berstens—Gene, Melanie, and Alan—became national Latin champions in junior and youth divisions as well as dance teachers. “Some may say we are talented, but I say talent means nothing in this industry. It’s all about the hard work. The harder worker will always pass the more talented dancer. Talent of course helps, it gives you a head start; but the hard work, the technique, the foundation will always shine through.”

Building self-confidence can also have its downside. “People used to say when I was younger that I was cocky and arrogant. But it was taught to me—my coaches taught me that. When I was young I was really self-conscious, I didn’t speak very good English, my parents didn’t have a lot of money, and I didn’t have nice clothes. In dance, they taught me the opposite—to be confident and happy in what I do. We were grown up like this—to learn to have such high self-worth.”

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, Elena’s family in Orel, Russia was also deeply immersed in dance. Elena’s mom is a dance teacher, judge, competition organizer, and dance studio owner in Russia. Though her mom wanted 8-year-old Elena to start dancing in the studio, Elena would have none of it. “They put a good boy partner with me. I was so shy. I didn’t want

to dance with a boy. I said I wouldn’t go anymore. Mom tried again and I said no.” So her mom put Elena into gymnastics. Finally, when Elena was 12, “Mom offered to teach dance for free to my classmates at school. The principal agreed, and that was fun for us. Later, students could sign up for more lessons at the studio. And that is how I started to dance.” Now that is a clever mom!

Elena attended intense dance camps in Moscow. She returned to Orel to teach and became a judge. Later she created a dance show based in Moscow, performing before royalty and celebrities. “To live in Moscow was hard and very expensive, but I got good experience with the dance show, so I went back and forth between Moscow and Orel.” She sent her dance videos to several agencies. One recruited her for

“Burn the Floor,” a prestigious dance troupe of dancers from around the world that traveled globally.

It was a great career move, with benefits. That’s where she met Gene, in Florida, in 2008. They worked together every day, but somehow found time to “feed the crocodiles” as well. They toured globally, and continued their long-distance relationship after the tour. Elena began teaching in the Bersten family studio when she visited Minnesota. “We fell in love,” recalled Elena. “We understood we (couldn’t) live without each other.” They prepared immigration documents for Elena to move to Minnesota in 2011.

They were engaged on the Eiffel Tower in Paris and married in Minnesota September 4, 2011. Elena became a U.S. citizen in 2016. “We are



Elena and Gene Bersten. Photo by Marc James Anderson of Creek 44.

very compatible,” added Gene. “We are like best friends, together 24/7. That would drive some people nuts. We enjoy it.”

Dance continued as the family central focus. Both Gene and Alan auditioned for Season 10 of the television series, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and both passed all auditions. “It came down to me and Alan, and they took the younger cast that year. The oldest dancer was 18 or 19, and I was about 25. They took Alan, who eventually placed in the top six. They invited me for the next season, but I said no, because we then had a child,” explained Gene. Alan later performed with *Burn the Floor*. From there Alan joined the dance troupe of the hit television show *Dancing with the Stars*, and soon became a dance professional matched with celebrity dancers. He and partner Bachelorette Hannah Brown won the Season 28 Championship, and Alan, now 26, continues with the show today.

“Alan and I are very close. He’s still my best friend,” continued Gene. “We talk every day on the phone about

everything. I always say I’m his biggest critic and his biggest fan. I ‘feel’ how he dances; we feel for each other. It is more stressful watching him dance than myself dancing. Even now on *Dancing with the Stars* I look at all his routines before he dances them.” Gene feels the same thing when he competes with his students. “I am more nervous for their results than I am for my own. I want them to do well. They work so hard and I think they deserve it. I always want my students to dance 150% so after they are done they are not thinking to themselves, ‘I wish I did more.’”

Their dreams for the future? “My main thing in life is always a happy, healthy family, that’s #1,” Gene started. “I want my kids to be successful in anything they do. That is what I tell all parents whose kids take lessons here. If they want their kids to be good at anything, they have to go 100%. You can’t do anything halfway. If parents aren’t encouraging their children to work more, they are not going to do it. I don’t know any kid who wants to sit in the studio for hours and work

his butt off. Anyone good at anything works their butt off. That is the difference between growing up in America and in other countries. It’s a difference in culture.”

For the Bersten daughters, it’s even more than 100%. “I expect more from them than other kids. But they deliver. It’s tough love,” said Gene. “If I didn’t think they were capable, I wouldn’t push. I start them the right way right away. I teach them hard work. Of course, we want them to have fun too, so they have fun with it. But they have to work.”

“At four years old we push them a little more here in the studio. We can yell a little bit louder and ask more of them. They have lots of lessons with us and different instructors and partners,” Elena said.

And their other goals? For Gene and Elena, both already certified National Judges, it is to make Finals in *World Rhythm* next year. With babies and a studio, the couple never danced together competitively. They now have three competitions under their belts. “When we practice we are very efficient, because I don’t know any pros at this level who have three kids. It’s hard to sustain this level,” said Gene.

They also want to build a community of dance. “We want to leave the next generation of dancers better off than we were. We want to grow this; we want to have lots of *Dance with Us America* studios (current sites are Southdale Mall and Plymouth). We are bringing over new instructors; we need to get their visas approved.”

The Berstens continue to teach students in all four dance styles, even during the coronavirus pandemic. They acknowledge that their strict technical focus and high teaching expectations aren’t a fit for every student. But their mission and life experience can inspire anyone. **E**



Elena and Gene Bersten. Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.