



Florin Vlad & Natalia O'Connor

Speaking Their Hearts

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Some people search their whole lives to find out what they are “meant” to do. Other people fall into it as children and live their passion.

Florin Vlad was born and raised in the Transylvania Region of Romania. He was close with his family, growing up celebrating holidays together and spending his summer breaks at his grandparents’ and aunt’s houses in the countryside. “I would help them with chores like collecting the hay for the livestock, feeding them, picking apples, plums, etc. At my aunt’s house she had a flour mill that I would love to poke around and, of course, ended up covered from head to toe in flour,” he remembers.

At 10 years old, a family friend invited Florin’s family to come watch their son’s ballroom dance competition. What started as a Sunday like all the others turned into a life-changing event for Florin. He thought it looked fun and wanted to give it a try, so he asked his parents to sign him up for a beginner class. Florin enjoyed learning a new activity and having a different array of friends. Dance had turned into a fantastic outlet, and luckily, he had talent for it and kept on going. His family was very supportive, and he hasn’t stopped dancing since.

Born in Illinois, Natalia spent her early years just outside of Philadelphia. She always enjoyed sports, excelling in junior tennis. As she got older, she also loved playing volleyball with friends and visiting European cities. At eight years old, she stumbled on a ballroom dance competition on TV. “It was love at first sight!” she says. Her parents signed her up for a Saturday class at a nearby studio. Luckily, she was able to find a dance partner right away, and they soon began participating in local and national competitions.

Her parents divorced when she was 10 years old, and Natalia

moved with her mother to St. Petersburg, Russia—her mother’s native country. Natalia found herself in a completely different culture. Not only needing to adapt to a new school and find new friends, she also needed to learn a new language. Dance became a saving grace, helping her to focus and feel like she fit in. She immersed herself, training with coaches from England and Italy to help achieve her goals. She loved being a part of the dance community and making friends that shared her passion, and the ability to travel to new places and explore different cultures was an added bonus. “After a few years of taking lessons and competing, I realized that dancing allowed me to express myself, to discipline myself, to have high goals, and to be confident,” says Natalia. “Of course, I always had thoughts of leaving this industry when I was young and starting to think about college, but I always tried to imagine what would I do if I wouldn’t be a professional ballroom dancer. It was very clear that this is the profession I dreamed of, and I knew that with hard work, no goal was too hard to reach.”

At 16 years old, Florin’s dance partner left, so he posted an ad on an international dance site for a new partner. Natalia called him up and after chatting for a bit, she came to Romania to try it out. Things worked out, and she lived with Florin and his parents while they trained. “At that point, dancing was becoming an increasingly important part of both of our lives, and it was certainly serious enough that my family and I would have a complete stranger (at the time) move and live in our house full time and train to become the best dancers we can be,” says Florin. “It all sounds a bit crazy now, looking back, but I want to thank my family for taking that crazy step of welcoming Natalia into our family with open arms.”



They continued to live and train in Romania while Florin worked on his schooling and Natalia finished hers remotely. After a few major disappointments in the results of two of the main national dance events in Romania, they realized they were not going to be able to achieve their goals if they stayed put. "Let's put it this way," says Florin, "no matter how good our dancing would have been, we would have not been able to receive the result we deserved. However, it turns out, it might have been the best thing that happened to us!"

The World DanceSport Federation (WDSF) rules state that at least one partner must be a citizen of the country the couple is representing, so since Natalia was still a US citizen, they decided to try dancing for the US. They started by visiting Natalia's grandparents in Pownal, VT and Florin's father's cousin in Chicago, staying with them a few weeks at a time. Eventually, they lived with them a few months at a time while they continued to train and compete in both national and international competitions. Soon, they were winning every event they attended. Their hard work had paid off. They even became the US National Champions!

They are a very goal-oriented couple, and competition has become an important aspect of their career. "Competitions are a great way to push yourself to the next level," says Florin. "Once you are in a cloud of peers, you have to work harder, and it accelerates your earning and retention. Anyone can take lessons, but without shows, progress is very slow. Competition accelerates the learning process and one of the most exciting parts of our careers. We love the traveling aspect of it and always seeing new places and meeting new people, many of them becoming our friends. Natalia and I probably have over a hundred competitions under our belts, yet we still get the same thrill when we are about to walk on the competition floor. It's an indescribable feeling that



we absolutely love."

Winning the national championships was also an incomparable experience. The championship was held in Baltimore that year, and just as things were getting going, a fire alarm went off. Everyone had to evacuate the ballroom, and the whole event ended up delayed. By the time they finished, it was 3:00 in the morning! After receiving their medals, they still had to go take the standard anti-doping test before they could finally rest, but the next day was full of celebration. "It was the successful culmination of a constant race for improvement and the reward for all those times when we came short of winning but didn't give up," says Florin. "However, the most important thing winning the nationals gave us is the confidence to want even more and improve even further to reach new goals. We can say it was a stepping stone."

While they knew they wanted to keep competing and achieve new goals, they also knew they wanted financial independence, and

building a successful life together became their first priority. They enjoyed their time in VT but wanted to move to an area that had more opportunity, not only for competitions, but to teach and perform. They chose the Capital Region, and at only 22 and 23 years old, they opened their studio, Dance Fire, right here in Niskayuna in 2017, becoming one of the youngest ballroom dance studio owners in the US. They quickly settled into the friendly and supportive dance community that welcomed them with open arms. It was a dream come true, and they now have one of the Capital Region's largest dance studios, working as head teachers while still traveling the world for competitions. "When we both took our first step onto the dance floor, we certainly did not think it would become such an integral part of our lives—yet here we are all these years later doing what we love for a living!"

Dance Fire offers a variety of classes suited for anyone's tastes or experience level. As with everywhere else, COVID slowed things down, but with the increased vaccinations, the studio has been able to slowly return to normalcy, and they are even growing their programs, especially their kids' programs. This summer, they are offering a dance camp that encompasses ballet, acting, and ballroom dance. The students can choose to attend one or more of the classes to explore what they love most. They are also preparing for a fall program offering ballet, jazz, ballroom, and other styles in a unique fusion class. Dance Fire partners with the local chapter of USA Dance to offer merit scholarships



to participants of their program, and they will be performing at various venues around the region to promote a healthy lifestyle and creativity for children.

For adults, the studio offers both DanceSport style as well as social ballroom lessons, which is what people think of when preparing for a wedding or other event. Dance Fire also organizes a variety of events like showcases, medal testing, and in-studio competitions as well as signature parties with live music by the Capital Region's most popular bands and orchestras.

"DanceSport" is the term for the competition side of ballroom. The WDSF coined the term in the early 1980s. In 1997, the International Olympic Committee granted full recognition of the WDSF as the International Governing Body for DanceSport. USA Dance, Inc. is the recognized sports organization for DanceSport in the US and is the National Member Body of the WDSF.

"What drew us the most to ballroom dancing was its perfect combination of athletic ability and endless creativity," says Florin. "The ideal balance between art and sport. It helps us live a healthy lifestyle and keeps our minds engaged and bodies active. We were surrounded by the best team of teachers that believed in us and our success. This is a very important part of being the dancers that we are today. However, I feel like that could be said about many activities—having mentors that really believe in you and guide you through the journey."

Their dance journey also led to their marriage on June 3, 2018, in a fairytale wedding in



Florin's hometown. "We had the most fabulous wedding with everything from opera singers, to a one-of-a-kind cake (that was taller than us) to a spectacular firework show that could've rivaled many 4th of July firework celebrations. It was unforgettable!"

Now that the COVID restrictions are lifting, they are excited to get back to competing with a busy fall schedule that is sending them to new places for competitions in Hawaii, London, Italy, and Russia.

They have settled into the community and are active outside of the studio as well, volunteering with the Niskayuna Rotary Club and Community Loan Fund of the Capital Region Investors, members of the National Dance Council of America, and supporters of the Capital Region USA Dance Chapter, as well as serving on the boards of the Albany Chapter of the American International Dance Association and The Benedicts (a dinner dance social ballroom club). Outside of work, they enjoy relaxing in their backyard, taking day trips to surrounding areas, hiking, spending time on one of the local lakes, and enjoying an evening out at a local restaurant.

Viewing dance as a never-ending journey, they continue to train regularly. "We've been so blessed to be able to forge strong coaching, training, and mentorship-



mentee relationships with some of the biggest names in the ballroom dance world—all of them with former World Champions or World finalists, the best in our ballroom dance world. They inspire us every day to achieve those heights one day, too!"

They are so grateful to have a life that not only enables them to do what they love, but also allows them to spread that passion to others. Their favorite part of their job is, "making our students walk out of the studio with a big smile on their faces and giving people a positive outlook on their lives through dance, helping them overcome any challenges they face." Just like one of their favorite sayings, attributed as an old Indian saying: "Watching us dance, is hearing our hearts speak."

For more information about Florin & Natalia's studio, Dance Fire, visit <https://www.dancefirestudio.com>.

