Ballet dancer Tanner Bleck: Living the dream after a nightmare

Tanner Bleck was terrified of what his mother might have done.

He was waiting for her at the stage door after a San Francisco Ballet performance, and she was way overdue.

“I called her and said, ‘Where are you?’ and she said, ‘I’m with Patrick, right now,’ and I was like ‘How are you with Patrick!’” Bleck says, recalling the Memorial Day weekend performances.

Patrick (pronounced Pat-reek) is Patrick Armand, associate director of the San Francisco Ballet School, where Bleck had been studying for two years. To the students, Armand was their leader who they regarded with a spoke-when-spoken-to kind of reverence.

“You don’t approach your director,” Bleck says. “I was like, ‘Mom, what have you done?’”

But then he heard his director imploring the Lexington native to join them — “Get over here, Tanner!”

Armand had found Lori Bleck, Tanner’s mom, in the crowd after the show and wanted to share some huge news.
“He grabbed me and said, ‘You’re Tanner’s mom, I need to talk to you,’” Lori recalls. “He said ... I’m so proud of him, and I want to make him trainee. ... He’s got something special, we all see it.”

Trainee with the San Francisco Ballet is a position almost every aspiring ballet dancer wants to attain. It puts the dancers on stage with the Ballet’s core company and on the radar of artistic director and principal choreographer Helgi Tomasson. It also comes performances with travel, including on the stage of Washington D.C.’s Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and expanded dance and educational opportunities.

It’s a dream he and his family were afraid may have died less than two years ago.

The first step to becoming a San Francisco Ballet dancer was getting his foot in the door at the school. To do that, he traveled to Europe to the Prix de Lausanne competition where he first studied with Armand, which made him want to go to the San Francisco Ballet School more. At the end of the event, he received the offer for a full scholarship to the school, with housing included.

“To be there and actually living it, doing it, it’s amazing,” Tanner, 18, says.

But one month into the program, he was in class, practicing jumps. He went up for a jump, and the whole room — even people in the room across the hall — heard a sound like a gunshot.

“My leg completely snapped,” Tanner recalls, with surprising calm. “I was screaming in pain.”

He was taken to the emergency room, and his mom was called.

“My heart just went into my stomach,” Lori recalls. “They said, ‘Lori, he’s OK, but he hurt his leg, and it’s really bad. I just thought, ‘Oh my God, there goes everything, because we’ve sacrificed so much, and we’re a paycheck-to-paycheck family. We’re not one of these people that has a bunch of money, and everything he has gotten, he has worked his rear end off for, literally, his entire life.”

Bleck started dancing at Bluegrass Youth Ballet at age 7, and eventually studied at the School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCAPA) and took jazz and tap at Town and Village School of Dance.

Soon after he started, BYB Director Adalhi Aranda Corn approached Lori Bleck and her husband, telling them Tanner had potential in terms they didn’t really understand.
“She said his feet were beautiful, and we thought, ‘OK,’” Lori says. “She saw something in a 7-year-old little boy that we had no clue.”

Eventually, the Blecks started to find their way around the ballet world, taking Tanner to competitions and intensives until he eventually moved at age 14 to study at Next Generation Ballet in Tampa, Fla., which he chose over schools at National Ballet Canada and American Ballet Theatre.

“Something in my gut told me to go with Next Generation Ballet, go with Peter Stark,” Tanner says, referring to the school’s founding artistic director, who is now at the Boston Ballet School. “To get into one of these big companies, he really taught me what to do technically, the emotional side of big companies, and that made me want it even more, want ballet even more.”

A consistent theme for Tanner is teachers who were hard on him and pushed him.

“You put everything together, the love and technique from Adalhi, the tricks and more technique I got from Peter Stark and NGB, and putting all that together — before it was like, ‘Oh I do this, and I do this one too,’ and they started to push everything together, and it started forming.”

Stark pushed Bleck to go to competitions where he could be seen by major companies, which is how he ended up at the 2014 Prix de Lausanne in Switzerland, where he caught the eye of Armand and the San Francisco Ballet.

But then in October of 2015, everything was up in the air as Bleck came home to Lexington to begin his recovery. He tried to use his time in a thigh to foot cast well, concentrating on school classes so he could graduate early and focus on ballet, once he got better. He hit the gym and, of course, physical therapy, trying as much as possible not to lose the conditioning he had developed over the years.

He also had to draw on the emotional grit he learned over the years from teachers that pushed him to go farther than he thought he could.

And he did come back. Despite having basically lost his first year in the San Francisco Ballet School to injury, he finished his second year with an invitation to become a trainee.

There was always a backup plan — Bleck has a love for computers and computer programming he has worked to develop. But he feels fortunate he’s not having to pursue that, despite a horrifying injury that has ended many careers.

“It’s almost a miracle that I was able to get up and dance again and get better than I was,” Tanner says. “Being from Lexington, Kentucky, I never thought I’d be dancing in San Francisco Ballet.”