

Three El Paso ballet dancers place at Youth America Grand Prix regional semifinals in Austin

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Jadyn Nelms, left, Victoria Villarreal and Lauren Gonzalez, bottom, are students of ballet at Olga's Russian Ballet School in West El Paso.

It's not often an El Paso ballet school places one dancer in the top 12 in any Youth America Grand Prix competition. Which makes what three young ballerinas from Olga's Russian Ballet School did at its latest competition that much more amazing.

Not one, not two, but three ballet students from the West Side school placed in the top 12 at the Youth American Grand Prix regional semifinals in Austin last month.

Lauren Gonzalez, 11, placed third in the classical dance category pre-competitive age division; Victoria Villarreal, 12, placed in the top 12 in the classical dance category junior age division; and Jadyn Nelms, 16, placed in the top 12 in the classical dance category senior age division.

"I was amazed by the high level competitors (in Austin) and I was very inspired to face all of them in person," said Olga Balbocean, the artistic director and ballet teacher at Olga's Russian Ballet School. "I think my students demonstrated a very decent level of our Russian Ballet School of El Paso. I'm proud of my students' achievement and mostly of the level of their dance technique and their improvement in the past years."

Balbocean, who was a principal dancer with the Moscow Ballet Company, was awarded the Outstanding Teacher Award at the Youth America Grand Prix semifinal ballet competition in Dallas in January 2014.

"We were working hard over many details, which allowed my students to be placed in the top levels in each of their age division," she said. "Each of my students was focused and worked many extra hours to present a high quality performance to make an impression on the judges and the audience."

At the Austin competition, hundreds of ballet dancers — ages 9 to 19 — not only competed, but also attended workshops and dance classes.

"It was a really fun experience because I was competing against some really great dancers," said Lauren Gonzalez. "It was tough competition. There was a lot of talent in that competition, so it was a real honor that I even placed."

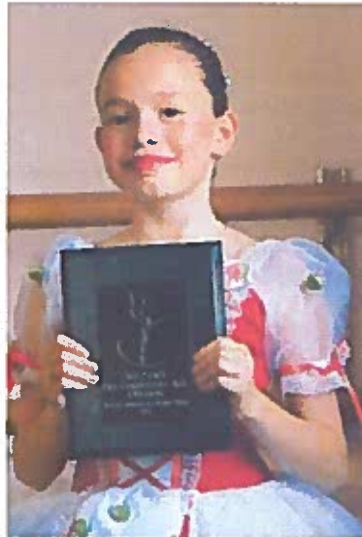
Family, friends and fans of ballet will have the opportunity to see all three of these girls perform at Ballet Divertissement at 6 p.m. May 9 at the Magoffin Auditorium on the University of Texas at El Paso campus.

"It's fun performing in front of my family and my friends because they know that my parents



Olga Balbocean, left, attaches a headpiece to student Victoria Villarreal on Sunday at Olga's Russian Ballet School at 631 N. Resler in West El Paso.

work really hard to send me to class and they get to see what I've learned," Lauren said. "There is a lot more pressure at competition, so this recital gives me the chance to do what I really love to do and just relax and dance."



Lauren Gonzalez, 11, with a recent award from the Youth America Grand Prix 2015.

Nelms, a sophomore at Franklin High School, has been dancing since she was 3 years old. She has been a student at Olga's Russian Ballet School since she was 10.

"Ballet is very disciplined art, so it not only helps you in the classroom but it helps you in life, too," she said. "I like performing a lot. It's graceful and it takes a lot of strength. It's just really

beautiful to perform."

Nelms said ballet might look easy, but it takes a lot of work.

"For competition alone, we rehearse probably two hours a day and that's on top of regular classes," she said. "On weekends we rehearse longer than two hours, plus we have dress rehearsals, group rehearsals and individual private lessons, so it's a lot of work."



A box of ballet shoes at Olga's Russian Ballet School at 631 Resler in West El Paso.

Nelms, who had two top 12 finishes when she was 11 years old and another top 12 this year in Dallas, said she prefers competition to regular performances.

"Competition is more individual," she said. "When you're competing, you're representing yourself, your teacher and your school. I like competing because when you perform really well and you get a good outcome from it, you feel really good about yourself."

Villarreal, 13, is a seventh-grader at St. Joseph's School. She has been dancing for 10 years and has been a member of the school for almost two years.

"That was my best finish," she said. "I had performed in Dallas about three weeks before that.

It was my first competition and I was so nervous and I did not do very good. But when we went to Austin, I had to do the best I could just to see how good I can actually be at this."



Victoria Villarreal, 12, gets help from her mother, Patricia Villarreal, at Olga's Russian Ballet School at 631 N. Resler in West El Paso.

Villarreal said being top 12 is one of the best rewards for a dancer.

"We work for eight months for two and half hours a day for two and a half minutes of actually dancing," she said. "You do all that work in rehearsal and your teacher will say, 'your heel in this little part is wrong' and you think, 'but nobody cares.' But you go to the competition and the judges will say the same thing; 'Your heels were turned in when you're running,' and you go, 'How did you even see that?' "

And like Lauren and Nelms, Villarreal loves competing.

"A lot of people think ballet is boring, but it's just the opposite," she said. " I love ballet as much as some people love basketball or other sports. This is what I want to do. I want to get better at it. I want to be the best that I can be. Every time I dance it's the best thing ever."

Victor R. Martinez may be reached at 546-6128.