

# Mesa ballerina, 15, offered spot at American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company



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*At 15, Mesa ballet phenom Gisele Bethea already has received a prestigious New York City contract offer.*



(Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

There's a reason serious dancers tend to wear closed-toe shoes, Gisele Bethea says, digging her mint-green Converse into the plush carpet of her living room.

She has just finished rattling off a list of ballet-studio war stories marked by quarter-sized blisters and bloodstained satin.

"Ballerina feet," she concludes, "are not pretty."

Those who've had the chance to watch the 15-year-old Mesa native on stage would disagree. Open any of Gisele's competition videos on YouTube, and there's sure to be a chain of fans gushing over her seemingly impossible arches, turnout and technique.

"Those feet. Those lines! She makes me want to cry," one woman posted last month, after checking out Gisele's 2013 performance at the International Ballet Competition in Moscow. "What a gift to get to watch her."

Gisele, too, describes her abilities — which, in a relatively short time, have brought her international recognition and a prestigious contract offer — as a gift. The slender, soft-spoken teenager is Mormon, and she repeatedly brings up God's role in her budding career.

It's clear, though, that any natural talent bestowed on Gisele was merely a starting point.

She also works really, really hard.

## 'Go, go, go'

At least six days a week, Bethea trains for six to eight hours, three or four of those in the pointe shoes she only half-jokingly calls "torture chambers."

"I think a lot of people see ballet as the little girl in a frilly tutu twirling around in a circle. I don't think a lot of people understand the extensive work that we go through, and the hours and the training and how hard it is," Gisele said.

Factor in the extensive stretching she does to warm up before class, the icing of her feet and ankles in the evening, and the physical, chiropractic and acupuncture therapy she occasionally needs, and it's tough to fathom when she'd have time to do much else.

Add the in-person seminary classes and online-high-school courses she takes, and it becomes impossible.

"People talk about keeping life in balance, and Gisele's life is not balanced," said her dad, John Bethea. "It's not. We think of it as 'OK, this is a period of training, like for an Olympic athlete, where they're go, go, go.' But the social part of it — seeing friends, going out — is a side that really gets gobbled up."

Gisele is usually out of town for the full summer competition season, said her mom, Heidi Bethea. Then, during the school year, she's gone at least once a semester for two or more weeks at a time.

The grueling schedule can be tough on the whole family: Gisele is one of four children, and Heidi and John often are apart during the bulk of Gisele's trips.

The trade-off?

"Gisele's travels and opportunities to compete in other places have afforded her the opportunity to have wonderful friends all over the world," Heidi said, from New York City to London, Moscow, Berlin and Beijing. "And that's been a blessing to our whole family, to just have these beautiful little friendships with kids who are like her, who don't go to school every day and get to sit by their best friend in Science."



Gisele hasn't entirely avoided cutthroat competitors and aggressive stage parents, of course, but she doesn't allow for that behavior in her own circle.



Ballerina Gisele Bethea works during class at the Master Ballet Studio in Scottsdale Jan. 6, 2015. (Photo: Michael Chow/The Republic)

"You can band together to be mean, or you can band together to be hopeful," Gisele said. "It wouldn't be fun, it wouldn't be worth it if you were stabbing people's backs to get to where you want to be.

"You don't move people aside so that you can go," she said. "You work to be the best that you can."

## A promising future

That work is paying off.

One of Gisele's instructors, Slawomir Wozniak, places Gisele among the top ballerinas of her age group.

Gisele has been training with the Wozniaks, a husband-wife team, since she decided to pursue a future as a professional ballerina at age 12. The decision marked a dramatic shift in her plans, given that she'd been less than enamored with ballet when she started.

"At first, I was like, 'I really don't like this.' It was boring for me. It was hard. I was little," she said. "But then, when I got older, I started improving, and...it just kind of started transforming me, even in daily life. I really started to fall in love with it and the nature of it and how beautiful it was, and I just decided, 'I think I want to do this as a career.'"

Knowing the commitment involved, the Betheas weighed the decision as a family before taking the leap. At the urging of Gisele's previous instructor, she began studying with the Wozniaks at Master Ballet Academy in Scottsdale.

There, she trains in the Vaganova method, which emphasizes passion and expression in addition to technique and athleticism.

Last year, she was offered a spot with the American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company in New York, a jaw-dropping achievement, some say, for a ballerina as young as Gisele. The studio company's dancers usually range in age from 16 to 20.

Even more impressive, ABT agreed to wait for Gisele when she asked to defer for a year to finish school, Heidi said. The family will reevaluate the contract offer in August.

In the meantime, Gisele has begun competing in "pas de deux" partner numbers, sometimes five times as long as the solo pieces she previously performed. She has been invited to guest perform in Poland, Vienna, Turkey and Brazil over the next year, Heidi said.

Asked if the pressure ever gets to her, Gisele describes tense moments backstage, trying to stay properly warmed up as she prays she doesn't miss a step.

"It's really amazing to me, because I'm backstage with her. I see there's some fluster," Heidi said. "But she gets on stage, and she just becomes someone else. She's Cinderella. She's Aurora. Once she gets on stage, the nerves are gone."



