

Local studio helped 'Dance' hopeful hone skills

Michelle Hoffman

Special for the Republic

Aug. 6, 2007 12:08 PM

Scottsdale's Lauren Gottlieb, a surviving contestant on the reality TV show *So You Think You Can Dance*, received her advanced instruction at a Northeast Valley dance studio.



Gottlieb, a plucky 19-year-old hooper and 2006 Desert Mountain High School graduate, is one of six finalists who will compete again on national TV Wednesday night.

"I'm the type of person who won't quit until I get it right," said Gottlieb, who from seventh-grade on honed her skills at Bender Performing Arts, 3141 E. Beardsley Road.

"I feel like everything I've worked for and sacrificed has led up to this moment," Gottlieb said by phone from Los Angeles. "I didn't get to go to my prom or homecoming dances because I was always at a competition."

Gottlieb, who took wing over 7,000 dancers during the TV show audition, started her training at age 7, when little girls are lured into ballet by pink tights and pretty tutus.

Gottlieb developed a passion for it and embraced its rigorous discipline, often spending six days a week in the studio.

"Lauren had an amazing work ethic," said Meri Bender, who with her husband, Kevin, owns and runs the dance school.

"As a dancer, you have to be as versatile as possible. She has always been able to do that. And she connects with her audience. That's really her gift," Meri Bender said.

The Bender studio is a cavernous 14,000 square feet and boasts a digital sound system, roomy studios and private music rooms.

Aside from the traditional ballet, tap and hip hop classes, the school extends its

curriculum to musical theatre, private voice lessons, guitar, piano and acting.

The school's alumni are an impressive lot that includes: actress and dancer Amy Davidson of *Eight Simple Rules*; dancer and singer Ashley Roberts with the *Pussycat Dolls*; Mandy Jiroux, back-up dancer for *Hannah Montana*; three Rockettes; and two dancers on Broadway's *Movin' Out* tour.

But Kevin and Meri Bender's mission is more organic and less elusive than fame.

"We're using dance as a tool to create better people," Kevin Bender said. "It teaches them life skills such as discipline, good health, time management and an appreciation for the arts."

His advice to parents? "Don't rush those seven years to be another Lauren Gottlieb. Art is a process and there's room for every type of dancer."

Gottlieb said she blossomed under the Bender's nurturing instruction. "The second I stepped into that studio, it felt like family. We became very close. They saw the bigger picture," Gottlieb said of the Benders.

"Since they weren't a competition studio, we were able to be very creative. We danced a lot of benefits and company shows," Gottlieb said.

No matter the outcome in the coming weeks, Gottlieb will be going on a 57-city tour with the top ten dancers of the show.

"That's great work for a dancer," Meri Bender said. "Most of the time, you get work as a backup dancer, like touring with Christina Aguilera. This is the only tour where it's just about the dancers."

Fall classes at Bender Performing Arts begin Wednesday. That evening, the Benders will host a preview party at the studio.

Meanwhile, Gottlieb hasn't let the klieg lights get to her. At the end of the day, this undaunted 19-year-old is just like her peers.

"I love being normal. I like to come home and just watch TV or get on the computer and check my myspace page," she said.