

From Ballet to BUSINESS

Tiffany Cordero '16 Forges Her Own Path



“If you have the privilege and the opportunity to reach for your dreams, actually go for them,” said Tiffany Cordero '16. “It’s a really beautiful life on the other side of fear.” She should know. She has reached for her dreams and reaped the rewards several times already in her life.

Cordero was one of the talented ballet students featured in an award-winning documentary entitled “LIFT” that premiered last June at the prestigious Tribeca Festival. The film profiles students in New York Theatre Ballet’s LIFT program, which provides scholarships for at-risk and homeless children to study ballet.

“I don’t talk about this part of my life all that much, but I grew up living in the New York City shelter system with my family,” she said. “You can’t control how you start, only how you finish. And that’s just how I started.” She excelled in the program to the point of performing professionally as a teenager.

“LIFT” was directed by Oscar-nominated filmmaker David Petersen alongside a star-studded team that included filmmaker Sam Pollard as executive producer and dancer Misty Copeland of the American Ballet Theatre as principal advisor. The film recently won the inaugural Children’s Resilience in Film Award from nonprofit media company Shine Global and the 2022 Best Documentary Film Award at the San Francisco Dance Film Festival.

In search of after-school programs that could double as child care, Cordero’s mother signed up her two daughters to audition for the LIFT program. At first, Cordero was not interested in ballet — “it seemed too girly and weak” — only auditioning at age nine because her sister wanted to. Both girls won full scholarships. “Through the LIFT program, I was able to afford my ballet studies,” Cordero said. “And ballet is pretty much what saved me.”

She soon found that ballet was much more demanding than she had expected: “Ballet requires you to be so physical, so focused and so disciplined. Your brain has to be in tune with your body. It taught me such self-awareness and how to really listen. And the studio was my equalizer because it really didn’t matter there how much money I had or where I came from. If I practiced and if I listened, I would be good. Hard work really did pay off.”

One day, Petersen showed up in the studio to film. “He said, ‘I don’t know exactly what I’m creating here, but when it’s done, I hope that it gives you all a voice.’ It took more than 10 years, but I do think the film has given us a voice. It’s been a really rewarding and gratifying experience to share this part of my story. I was ashamed of my background, and it’s really wonderful now to have people see me as strong instead of as a victim of my circumstances. I was disadvantaged in some ways as a child, but I was very advantaged in others.”

By the time she was in high school, Cordero was dancing professionally with New York Theatre Ballet and apprenticing with ballet companies in Europe.

When it was time to apply for college, she wanted to study something other than dance. The advisor



Steven Melendez, artistic director of New York Theatre Ballet



Cordero, second from left, with Mercy Business Honors students, Class of 2016

Photos provided by Cordero

of her high school's Virtual Enterprises International club mentioned that Mercy College was awarding scholarships to the School of Business. Before long, Cordero's smarts, passion and ingenuity secured her a full scholarship to Mercy's Business Honors program.

"From beginning to end, my time at Mercy was an incredibly valuable learning experience," she said. "I met a lot of different people, and I applied all those active listening skills I developed in ballet. Mercy is a very respectful, tolerant place where people from different walks of life can have real conversations and begin to understand each other. I learned so much about how to interact with other people and the kind of person that I want to be."

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in marketing and a minor in media studies, Cordero explored a few different fields, including qualitative research and software sales before landing in her current role as a product and market strategy analyst at investment management company Lord Abbett & Co. LLC. "I really don't think I would've really ended up where I am now if I didn't try all those other avenues," she said. "I'd probably be wondering, 'What if that's for me?'" She likes that her current role draws on her research, technical and writing skills. Her team and clients are quite international, and she often finds herself thinking back on her experiences at Mercy where she learned how to work with diverse groups of people.



Cordero, 4th from left, in "LIFT"

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After a year in her current role, she realized that she was ready for a new challenge and began searching for a way to add more value to her firm. Her interests in sustainability management, geopolitical risk and behavioral economics led her to delve into Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) — an emerging, values-driven approach to business that few companies have implemented and few professionals specialize in, especially women.

"By becoming a subject matter expert in ESG, I'd love to be part of creating a more sustainable corporate environment — and beyond that, a more sustainable world," she explained. "For example, how do we create more sustainable government programs that actually help people excel? The way government programs currently work, we put people in situations where they feel comfortable or helpless, rather than empower them. That's a goal I can start moving toward now by working to empower people financially and artistically too."

Indeed, Cordero is already working to empower others artistically by volunteering with the board of directors at New York Theatre Ballet: "I could never put a dollar value on what LIFT and ballet have given to me. The only thing comparable is time, a commodity that is so precious. So this is the best way for me to repay that incredible organization where it all started for me and pay it all forward for others."